JUN

10¢

RANGELAND ROMANCES

FOUR WESTERN LOVE NOVELETTES

COWBOY'S ALMOST-BRIDE by THOMSON

GAME LITTLE BANDIT-LOVER by BECHDOLT

HEIRESS TO ROMANCE RANCH by KING

STAR DUST AND MAKE-BELIEVE by WAY

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*Adventure for May, on sale April 10th.

**Adventure for June, on sale May 10th.

15 CENTS

Adventure

EVERY MONTH

JULY ISSUE WILL BE PUBLISHED MAY 25th

10¢ RANGELAND ROMANCES

Volume Thirteen June, 1939 Number One

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ALL STORIES NEW **NO REPRINTS**

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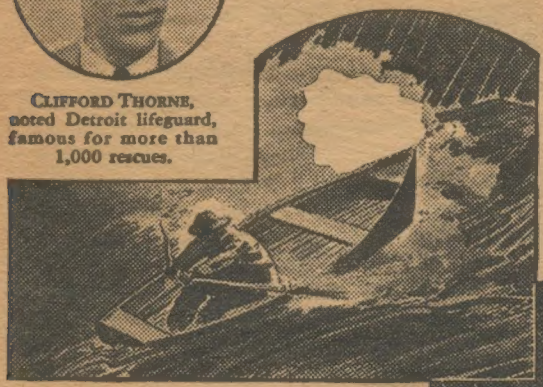
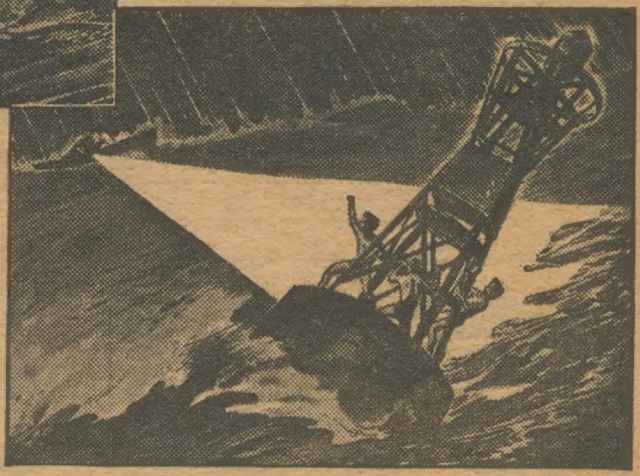


❶ "I stayed out on Lake St. Claire until well after dark fishing," writes Clifford Thorne of 716 Van Dyke Ave., Detroit, Mich. "As I started rowing home a terrific squall hit. Rowing was almost impossible and the rain was so heavy it blotted out lights half a mile away. And then, over the howl of the wind I thought I heard cries for help.



❷ "But I couldn't tell where the sound was coming from. I thought of the powerful, focusing flashlight that lay on the back seat, reached cautiously for it and played it around me... *and there they were!* Three youngsters clinging in terror to a rocking sea buoy. They had tried the usual stunt of swimming out to the buoy and back, but the storm spoiled the plan.

❸ "Yes, I got 'em ashore safely, in spite of an overloaded boat, the heavy seas and the heavy rain, and I can't take all the credit either. Plenty of it belongs to 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries, first for finding the lads on that buoy and later for standing by us and pointing the way through that storm to a safe landing.

(Signed) Clifford Thorne"

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Robber's Daughter

IT MAY not be altogether lady-like to wait along the trail for a man you've never been introduced to. But Patricia McManus made no pretense of being a lady. The Texan who was coming, with a rifle across his knees, had set her heart a-thumping when she had seen him last spring. And all she knew was that she wanted to see him again.

But then, there was nobody at Rancho McManus to advise a nineteen-year-old girl on questions of lady-like behavior. There were women servants, Mexicans. As for the rest, it was a man's world, echoing to the loud voice of her father, old Robber McManus—a world cluttered with saddles, bridles, spurs, and critters; a world that smelled of the sharp tang of horses and cattle and the sun beating on sagebrush. Not a world to school a girl in women's ways.

A few hours ago she had heard her father say, "That hombre John Collins is heading this way." She had not waited for more. She had not heard old Robber McManus' further instructions: "Tell the boys to keep their firearms handy. Collins may make us trouble."

John Collins had returned! They would meet! Her heart sang with the knowledge as she waited on the trail . . . .

He saw her then, and the rifle barrel swung her way—before he saw she was a girl, and alone. He reined in, slid from his saddle and came toward her afoot, hat in hand, his straw-colored hair shining in the sharp light.

"I've been waiting a mighty long time for this meeting," he said. "I was beginning to think you were the stuff that dreams are made of."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about!" Her startled gasp was a feeble defense. All her bolstered-up courage had gone. Though she had seen the man before, on that enchanted night so long ago, she had no idea he had seen her.

"Sure you don't know what I'm talking about?" There was a teasing glint in the brown eyes. "Maybe you'll remember when I tell you about it." He was watching her face.

"I'm talking about a night last spring. A night when I was in this neighborhood, driving a thousand head of prime, northbound cattle. I was sleeping alone by my campfire. I sleep light. Suddenly my eyes

opened, but I just lay still, waiting to see what had waked me. And I saw . . . you!"

She stared at her hands, crossed in front of her, wondering why his voice made her heart do somersaults. He laid a hand on her arm; though it touched her only lightly, it seemed to hold her.

"Suddenly you vanished," he went on. "Vanished just like dreams do. The rest of that night—until broad daylight—I thought you were just a lovely dream. But at sun-up I learned better."

"What happened at sun-up?" She forgot that she must seem aloof and dignified.

"I found something that proved you were flesh and blood." He had unfastened an object pinned to the inside of his shirt pocket, and held it in his palm.

She caught a glimpse of an old-fashioned gold locket that she recognized. In the locket was a tiny miniature, a likeness of her mother.

"Oh!" She barely breathed it. "I've looked everywhere for that!"

"I rode nearly six hundred miles to return it to you."

The shining of her eyes thanked him.

"Maybe you wonder why I didn't bring it back while I was still in the neighborhood? It just happened I had a mighty good excuse to give the Rancho McManus a wide berth."

His voice turned hard as he added, "Just driving my cattle this way lost me a hundred head of prime beef. I was in a sweat to get away from here before Robber McManus got my whole herd."

"You think we stole your cattle?" gasped Patricia.

Romance had fled. Her cheeks were red with indignation.

"I know you did." . . . His lips were firm now, unsmiling. . . .

In a tamer, more civilized part of the world, that might have settled it. John Collins belonged on the other side of the fence. Patricia was Robber McManus' daughter, and she knew her duty. . . . But, too, she had dreamed dreams—her veins sang to the wild message of her heart.

And, in the West, the heart is accustomed to have its way. It's not always easy. It takes courage, and it may mean sacrifices—and tragedy. . . . What it meant in the life of Patricia McManus, the untamed princess of Robber McManus' rancho, will be related next month in a novel-length story called, "Love Lays Siege to Robber's Roost," by Jack Bechdolt. The July issue of *Rangeland Romances* will be published May 25th. . . .

—THE EDITOR.

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Heiress to Romance Ranch

A novelette of Western love

By Oliver King

Fire coursed through her veins; her will power drained from her.

Gloria's poignant, romantic dream of the West—and its rugged men—came to life . . . in a nightmare of heartbreak!

CHAPTER ONE

Welcome to Paradise

GLORIA CARSON got off at the Red Feather station and caught her breath. It was all so much as she had pictured it—the heat; the smell of tarred ties under the rails and of weathered wood from the station shed; the false-

fronted buildings of the main street, showing some fifty yards away across the vacant lot, which was a conglomeration of Jimson weed, old tin cans and cinders.

And the men standing about, in chaps and checkered shirts! Some of them, even, had sixguns belted at their waists! The West, the true cattle country—she had dreamed of it so long! And here it was, and she a part of it!

Only, somehow, it was so much more than she had imagined—so much more intense. It had so deep a quality of sun-drenched, dusty, hard-furrowed reality as to make something in her hesitate, draw back, quiver with a timidity for which her hurrying thoughts could find no plausible explanation.

She stood, with her eyes flickering over the platform and the men on it, trying to pick out the one who would be there to meet her. And she found that she was the center of all attention. Alert, hard, estimating glances hit her and then caromed off her with a queer, gentle politeness that contrasted strangely, she thought, with the unyieldingness which lay deep in these men's eyes.

She picked out an elderly, bow-legged individual, with white mustaches and shrewd squinty eyes. This must be Bill Thane, her foreman. But he made no move toward her.

The rest of the passengers—a flouncy, over-dressed girl, a man in black who had the air of a gambler, a mother with a child—had all left the platform, going toward the town.

She wondered if she had been mistaken, if there was to be no one to meet her. And then, abruptly, a man was coming toward her. He had been standing back, at the other corner of the station shed, so that she had not noticed him. Now he came forward, giving an odd appearance of hurrying a little in his rolling, high-heeled walk, yet at the same time looking as though he were not hurrying at all.

He was a tall, lean, wide-shouldered man of about thirty, dressed in chaps and a faded, immaculately clean blue shirt which somehow brought out the vivid blue of his eyes under his weathered gray sombrero.

She had that glimpse of him, and then he was before her, taking off the sombrero to reveal hair that was dark, just faintly grizzled at the temples, and a wide, high, white brow.

"Are you Miss Carson, ma'am?" His voice was slow, drawling, with a queerly vibrant note in it.

"Yes," Gloria said quickly. "Are you—"

"Bill Thane, ma'am."

For some unaccountable reason, Gloria had to fight to keep her habitual poise. There was something about this quiet, soft-voiced man which was overwhelmingly masculine and demanding, without appearing to be so . . . something a little breathtaking.

"Oh, I—thought you'd be older," she said, smiling at him—and scolding herself because she knew that the smile was half-tremulous.

His quick grin showed a flash of strong, even teeth. "Well, ma'am," he said good-humoredly, "I reckon I've almost got my growth."

She felt like a fool, but fortunately he did not seem to notice her confusion. He was stooping to pick up her traveling bags. They were heavy, but they did not look so when he lifted them. It was, in fact, as though they contained nothing of any weight whatever.

When he straightened, he looked at her with grave courtesy and said, "Welcome, ma'am, to Red Feather an'—the Moonstone. The buckboard is right over there, if you care to ride out to the spread now."

GLORIA nodded, and followed his rangy, striding form, feeling the color come into her cheeks. It irritated her that she felt the impact of this man's personal-

ity so powerfully as to have been robbed of her usual poise.

She told herself that it was just the surprise of finding that she had, as a foreman, not an elderly, illiterate cowboy—but this even-featured, almost handsome individual who had such a quiet ease of manner and self-confidence. And who was so intensely and vitally male.

During the ride out to the ranch, she found herself divided between spells of utter silence and intervals of chattering in a way which she scarcely recognized in herself. She told of her life in Denver, of her dreams of the cattle country, of her surprise and delight at finding it so much like what she had thought.

The man at her side, handling the matched team with sure hands, had remarkably little to say, yet it was not until later that she realized how little. At the moment, there was a pithiness and point and kindness to everything he said which made him sound almost eloquent rather than taciturn.

She found herself a little breathless, what with the impact of the countryside, the color, the vastness, the great sense of continuing space. Even the team set her pulses to throbbing, in the thrilling realization that they were hers, these twin golden horses with their flying silver manes and deft, powerful hoofs that drew the buckboard careening over the rutty road and swaying around the turns.

The hot range wind whipped at her blond hair and brought the rich, keen pungency of sage and grass to her nostrils. The sun beat at the thin stuff of her dress and blinded her with a golden glory which somehow seemed to include this quiet, infinitely competent man at her side. She felt a little drunk with it all.

Back in Ohio, where she had been born, she had heard talk aplenty about the West, its legends, it heroes, its chances for fortune. It had seemed to her a golden land, where a man had only to be a man to make his fortune and lead a life of glorious ease and adventure. Her uncle, Ben Urquhart, her mother's brother, had gone there, and look at him!

And then her family had moved to Denver, where she had most of her schooling. There she heard even more about the great, golden West. Once, her Uncle Ben had come to see them—a great, full-bodied, hearty, kindly man who had pinched her cheek and tossed her high in the air and told her tales of the land which was his; which, it seemed to her, he had conquered, not so much by force of arms as by the greatness of his heart and his love for the land itself.

There had been talk of their going out there. But then her father had taken ill, and one thing after another throughout the years had always prevented them from going.

Her father had died. And they were poor. Uncle Ben had sent her mother money, but her mother had returned it, out of some obscure pride, saying that they had no need of it. And then her mother, too, had fallen ill and died.

Because her mother's memory had meant so much, Gloria then had returned Uncle Ben's money, saying she didn't need it. She had found a way, though for her untrained self it had been hard, to earn her own living.

That was all she had had of Uncle Ben—the memory of his great, hearty, kindly, romantic presence—until the day a letter came from a lawyer, announcing his death and saying that his will had left her all his property, including the Moonstone ranch.

And now she was here, mistress of the Moonstone—employer of and boss of this man at her side. Only, she couldn't quite imagine anyone being boss of this lean, wide-shouldered, plangent-voiced individual, whose vivid blue eyes looked so keenly yet tranquilly across this sun-smitten range.

HIS low, drawling voice interrupted her thoughts. "This is the Moonstone boundary, ma'am, an' yonder's some of your own cows."

She could see them grazing, their black and white markings vivid in the sunlight. Her eyes tried to make out the shape of the Moonstone brand, while her heart swelled with the strange pride and joy of possession.

Almost before she knew it, while her gaze was absorbed by the long feathery stretch of Marsh River, with its thick fringe of cottonwoods and willows, and by the great shimmery blue peaks of the mountains beyond—while all her attention was there, his voice cut in on her exultant thoughts again.

"Here's the ranch, ma'am."

And there it was—a great cluster of tree-shaded buildings, gleaming in the late sun. Her ranch! The Moonstone! Home! Its outlines dimmed in the quick, unwilling gush of tears that flooded her eyes from a heart suddenly too full. . . .

The excitement and the happiness of those first hours and days had a quality which she was never again able fully to recapture. She knew she'd never duplicate that first impression of the great, clean, queerly furnished ranchhouse, with its long vistas from room to room and its plain message that no woman had ever lived here. Its old saddles on the walls and its simple, severe chairs and table, its colorful Navajo rugs and bearskins, its absence of books or music, or any of the amenities of civilization—all fitted into the complete picture. Yet there was something about it—an essence of its own, incalculable, mysterious, hard, and enchanting.

She was met by old Carlotta, her wrinkled face beaming. She had dinner alone in the great beamed dining room. Tired, she went to bed early, in a tile-floored room, with the great soft stars pressing in at the open window and the cool, already familiar sage-scent sharp in her nostrils and the mournful, fierce yapping of a coyote far in the distance. The breeze carried the smells of corral and barn. She could hear the stamping of horses' hoofs and their soft snorting and the occasional mournful bellow of a cow.

As she lay there, sleepless, it was good to run over in her mind the faces and figures of the men who had met her there at the ranch—her men, her riders—the brown, strong, simple faces, at once friendly and reserved. She went over each detail of her arrival and of the ride out and of Bill Thane's words. Lying there in her sheer nightgown, in her own house, she remembered all that, and recalled the flashing eyes of the man they had called Jack Fulton, the range-toughened tall form of him and the queer caress in his voice when he had greeted her.

All that formed a maze and pattern of excitement, of wonder and half-unbelieving, throbbing happiness, the like of which she had never known before.

In the days that followed, it was glorious, exciting fun getting acquainted with the ranch and the men, with the horses and dogs and the hospitable expanse of the house, which in its wide, cool ramifications had something of the character of the range itself.

She knew that she was now a rich girl. The lawyers had made her aware of that. But it was one thing to know that she had inherited wealth, and it was quite another to find herself actually the mistress of this huge cattle spread—to see before her very eyes the actuality of her possessions.

And the men—*her* men! She had never before seen anything like them. The cities did not produce this quiet, easy strength—this scent and flavor and essence of easy, capable masculinity. It seemed to her quivering senses that in her very nostrils, all day long, there was such a scent of maleness as she had never dreamed of before.

That for a few days, and then . . . the first disillusionment!

CHAPTER TWO

Ranch of Shattered Dreams

IT CAME, curiously enough, from one of the most romantic things about a ranch—at least, in her eyes—from the attempt to master a fighting horse.

Jack Fulton, the tall, handsome black-eyed puncher whose flashing gaze had so wooed and caressed her that first night, was the man who attempted to ride the horse. She had been sitting on the ranch-house veranda, and she suspected, with a little thrill in her heart, that he was putting on the exhibition for her.

He led out a magnificent bay animal, wild, evidently, as a wolf. With the help of two other punchers he eared him down and put a saddle on him. Then he climbed into the saddle.

The horse squealed, crouched, his powerful legs tensed, and leaped skyward. Gloria's breath caught. It seemed that no man could withstand that first terrific, bucking leap. But Jack Fulton rode him as though he had been part of the horse.

The powerful animal jumped, swayed, bucked about the corral, with the puncher waving his Stetson and roweling him with spurs, riding as a sailor might sit a small boat in a storm.

But, suddenly, something seemed to go wrong. The exquisite union between man and beast was disrupted. Fulton jerked in the saddle, looking suddenly breathless and distressed. Then, abruptly, he sailed out over the horse's bucked-down head.

His face slapped against the corral bars and he lay still a moment, while the maddened horse bucked past him and around the corral. Then he got up and climbed quickly over the corral fence.

Gloria had left her seat and was already running toward the scene. As she got there, the dark-haired man climbed down from the fence and faced her, grinning sheepishly despite the fact that his face was streaming blood.

Before she could speak, she became aware that all around her the voices of the other punchers were raised in jeering laughter.

"Whyn't you grab his ear and swing down his throat, Jack?"

"Don't tell me you hurt your purty face?"

"How come he busted apart on you like that, son?"

"It warn't the hoss, it war Jack. That boy's plumb loco about dust, an' when the cravin' overcomes him he jest nat'rally goes for it all spraddled out."

Gloria stared indignantly about the circle. "It seems to me it's not much of a joke when a man gets hurt like that," she flared. "I never heard of anything so brutal!"

The circle fell silent, staring at her, abashed, with jaws dropped.

It was at that moment that Bill Thane came striding from the south pasture. He disregarded Gloria and faced Jack Fulton, eyes slitted.

"I thought I told you not to try to ride that horse, Jack," he snapped.

Fulton's face darkened. "What's the matter with ridin' him?" he demanded sullenly. "He's a horse, ain't he?"

"But you aren't a rider," Thane rapped.

Temper surged into Fulton's face. "Hell!" he boiled over. "I'm a dang sight more of a rider than you. You didn't want anybody to top the bronc because you're dang well scared to ride him yourself. Don't think, by hell, that you can—"

Bill Thane took one swift step toward him, his left fist licking like a lizard's tongue. It looked so smooth and swift, that blow, as to seem harmless, yet the spatting impact of it on Fulton's cheekbone was loud in the evening air, and the dark puncher staggered back and measured his length on the ground.

GLORIA gave a strangled cry of horror and pity. But before she could assert her authority, Fulton was on his feet, rushing in. Coolly, his face curiously savage, Bill Thane stopped him with that licking left, and then whipped a lightning right to the dark man's jaw—a right that had the brutal impact of a butcher's cleaver on meat and bone.

That time Fulton went down to stay, and Gloria exploded.

"You—you brute!" she raged, white-lipped. "How dared you do a thing like that? What are you, anyhow? To hit a man who was already hurt, who couldn't defend himself! Is this what you call the West? Is that the way people behave out here."

The queer, cold anger, which had been in Bill Thane's face when he hit Jack Fulton, changed character. His expression took on a flush of temper in another key, so that for a moment, angry as she was, she was intimidated by it. Then it changed quickly, became no expression at all, became wooden and lifeless.

"Sorry, ma'am," he said evenly. "But as long as I'm foreman, I give the orders around here—an' I look for them to be obeyed."

She stared at him, breathing fast, the shock and outraged anger still ripping in her. "You may be the foreman," she said, through tight lips, "but I own this ranch. And I'm telling you not to hit that man again."

As she spoke, she turned swiftly away, but not before she saw that Jack Fulton had regained consciousness, that the dazed looked in his eyes had changed to sudden comprehension as her last words got through to his ears. Then she was on her way back to the house.

She tried to calm herself then, but could not. She couldn't forget the callous brutality of these men when they laughed at an injured man. And then, on top of that, the cold, calculated ferocity with which Bill Thane had beaten an underling who was already hurt and bleeding.

Her ideas about this great, free, colorful country began to change. Had she merely been a romantic girl, seeing a visionary beauty in something that was made up of ugliness?

She tried to tell herself that the entire fault lay with the brutal foreman, who gave his men no chance to show, or even to have finer feelings. She tried to tell herself that, but it was without conviction. The foreman hadn't been on hand when they had first laughed at Jack Fulton. There was no compulsion on them then.

All at once, all the savor was out of this great new adventure of hers. The ranchhouse seemed not merely magnificently plain and simple, but primitive, crude. The chickens that pecked freely throughout the yard, instead of being confined and properly fed, were symbols of disorder, of barbarism.

That night she tossed on her bed, feeling suddenly lost and lonely, and mourning a vanished glamor.

But in spite of that, or perhaps just because of it, the morning found her anger still smoldering, her mind set in the will to fight this thing by which she found herself surrounded.

Lying there in the cold dawn light, the faint cry of the bunkhouse cook sounded in her ears. "Come an' get it or I'll throw it to the hawgs."

There were no hogs, and it seemed to her that this was just another evidence of the callousness which inflicted everybody here. She reached a sudden decision. She got up suddenly, determinedly, the chill of the tile floor running through the soles of her bare feet, and she whipped out of her nightgown.

In the mirror of the big, heavy, dark wardrobe, her slim body showed for a moment, shadowy and dim white, like a lovely and breathless apparition in the cool, silent room. She stopped still, ar-

rested by its half-unexpected loveliness, searching the dark pools of her image's eyes for understanding, for a reason why her very presence had not changed these rough men into something softer, more gentle and considerate.

Her cheeks flamed suddenly. It came to her that she was imagining one man seeing her so, and being made into a gentler self. A man with blue eyes and a plangent, drawling voice. A man with lean hips and wide, powerful shoulders. Not a tall dark man. Not a man who was dashing and handsome and brave. No, merely a brute who masked his savagery under a soft voice and an easy, infrequent smile.

Fury at her witless self added to her anger. She flung herself into her clothes, ordered breakfast quickly and brusquely from a wondering-eyed Carlotta. Then, hard-faced, she strode out to the corral, where the men were saddling up for the day's work.

"I'll ride with you today," she said coldly to Bill Thane. "Please have a horse saddled for me."

He stared at her for a moment, then drawled, "Yes, Miss Carson." As he turned away, he had the merest shadow of a smile on his lips—a shadow which infuriated her still further.

GLORIA turned back to the house and had her breakfast. When she went out again, the others had gone, and he was waiting for her.

She flung into the saddle. "Where would you like to ride, ma'am?" he asked, with a spurious humility in his voice.

She turned on him, her eyes flaring. "I want you to go about your regular work," she clipped. "I'll just ride with you." And then she added, narrowing her eyes, "I want to see just how the work on this ranch is conducted."

For a moment, she thought she saw a little flicker of temper in his eyes, but then he nodded gravely. "Shore," he said softly. "I reckon that's nat'ral, ma'am."

She felt his eyes on her as she climbed, a little awkwardly, into the saddle. That added to her resentment—the fact that he did not offer to help her, and the silent criticism she sensed in his manner.

They rode out, in silence for awhile, in the direction which, he told her, most of the men had taken. "We're chousin' some stuff out of the brush up in the foothills," he explained. "I—you—haven't had much chance to get acquainted yet, an' I was savin' this until we went over things together. But—we've been losin' a little beef. Somebody's rustlin' it. Doin' it in a mighty clever way. We haven't been able to get onto 'em yet. But we're getting the stray stuff in, to make a count, an' to try to make it a little tougher for these jaspers that are stealin' it."

She glared at him, finding a sudden handle for her anger. "Why haven't you said anythin' about it to me before?" she demanded.

His blue, steady eyes looked straight ahead of him across the range for a moment, then dropped to his horse's head. "Why, ma'am," he said gently, "I wanted to go over things with you the second day you come, but you said you didn't want to hear anythin' yet, until you had got—acclimated, wasn't it?"

Hot color stained her cheeks. She knew that he had caught her, that he was covered, as far as dereliction of duty was concerned. But that didn't help her temper. She rode with set face, her irritation increased by the fact that her horse kept tossing his head, flinging it from side to side and upward, so that sometimes it seemed the back of his skull was about to hit her in the face.

After a while Bill Thane said politely, "If you'll jest ease up on his reins, ma'am. He ain't used to bein' rode with such a tight bit."

Coldly, but still furiously angry, she eased up on the reins. Almost at once, the

horse quit tossing his head. That made her madder still. In Denver she had ridden a little with a young man who had learned his riding from an English riding master in the East. He had taught her to keep a continual light tension on the bit. Here, she noticed, men rode with flapping reins, but she had thought that was wrong. She saw now that she had been a little stupid not to follow the custom of the country. She realized that Bill Thane had had the best of her again, and the fact did nothing to soothe her ruffled feelings.

THEY were riding across a stretch of smooth range then, following a kind of trail pounded into the grass by an innumerable succession of hoofs. Ahead of her and to the right, she saw riders outlined along a ridge. Their silhouettes seemed familiar. She started to veer off the trail, going toward them.

"Better keep close here," Bill Thane's quiet voice warned her. "It's ground-hawg country. The ground's full of holes."

What he said did not mean much to her, but she obeyed automatically, feeling only that each new command he gave her —or rather, each soft-voiced suggestion, which somehow amounted to a command —increased her sense of irritation.

So they rode along until a drywash intercepted the trail. Without thought, she guided her horse wide of it, angling toward a point nearby where the wash was so shallow that it would not need to be jumped.

The sharp movement of her reins, pulled in by habit, at once checked her horse and swung him on his heels to the right. He flung up his head, plunged, and abruptly there was a kind of cracking, sickening sound in her ears, while she found herself hurtling through the air. She landed spraddled on the ground, the breath smacked out of her.

She lay there a moment, gasping for air, expecting, somehow, that Bill Thane would come to her aid without delay.

But he did not come. She could hear him getting down from the saddle. She heard the squeak of the leather, the impact of his feet on the ground, and then there was silence—a silence all the more profound because somewhere in the seconds before the air had been rent by a scream, at once human and strange, which had bewildered her reeling mind without leaving any comprehensible image on it.

Her breath caught in her lungs, and she sat up painfully.

Bill Thane was standing by the side of her fallen horse. It was on its stomach, trying to get up. He had a gun in his hand, and his profile was turned toward her, hard, at once angry and unrelenting. His hand whipped up, and, before she could cry out, the sixgun blasted. The horse's head and neck quivered, and then his head sank downward, at first slowly, and then with a sudden movement which sent it spatting against the ground.

After that, everything was still.

Slowly, her eyes blazing, she got to her feet. "You've killed him!" she cried accusingly. "You've killed my horse."

Bill Thane turned eyes on her that were suddenly hard and hostile, yet his voice was still soft as he said, "It had to be done, ma'am."

"Had to be done?" she raged. "How do you know it had to be done?"

His mouth tightened and his eyes held a curious mixture of agony and anger. "Listen, lady," he said levelly, "I told you to keep on the trail, but I reckon I didn't warn you enough. This is my fault, mebbe, but don't let's talk about it right now."

She glared at him unbelievingly. He said it was his fault, but he really meant to say it was her fault. Rage and disgust shook her, shattered her. So this was what the great West was! Men who laughed at another's misfortune! Men who struck brutally at creatures who were down—a hurt man, or a poor helpless ani-

mal that had fallen—coldly, brutally, savagely! This was what she had idealized. This was what she had dreamed of. This—this savagery, was what she had inherited.

Better, poverty in Denver. Anything would be better than this crude savagery. And she made up her mind, then and there, to sell her ranch, to shake the dust of this disappointing, heartless country forever from her heels!

CHAPTER THREE

Heartbreak Dance

GLORIA hardly remembered that ride behind Bill Thane's saddle back to the ranch, so seething were her thoughts.

That day she fought herself, trying to say that she had been too hasty, trying to change her mind, blocked in the clear white anger of her thoughts by something mysterious which seemed stronger than her reason.

Perhaps it was because of that obscure thing that she decided to go to the dance that night. She told herself that it was the only dance she would be able to go to in this cow country, so she might as well experience it. Yet there was an awareness in her that something else drove her on.

She dressed in her prettiest evening dress and, looking at herself in the full length mirror of the wardrobe, she knew that she was really lovely. Her shoulders were slender yet fully fleshed above the neck-curve of the dress. Her blonde hair, piled high in the new Denver style, looked ravishing. Her full, flounced dress hung and swayed above the delicate morsels which were her slippers. She thought, tossing her head, that at least she would make a last appearance which this brutal country would remember.

For hours she had wondered whether she would invite Jack Fulton to take her to the dance. He was, she told herself, the only man on the place she really liked. But she had decided against it, for some reason which she could not fathom. Instead, she had asked old Ned Ferguson to drive her in—a request which was practically an order, since he was one of the least of her hands.

And then the dance. It turned out to be an experience wholly unlike what she had anticipated. It was crude. The people were crude in their manner and in the clumpy barnyard dances which they obviously loved. And yet, there was something in the atmosphere, too, which she had not anticipated and yet which was reminiscent of all her dreams of this country—a hearty warmth and friendliness, an informality and good humor coupled nonetheless with a meticulous attention to some underlying code of courtesy and respect.

That, among themselves. For her, there was a politeness which somehow lacked warmth, a cordiality which set her a little apart.

Even her own punchers did not dance with her, except for Jack Fulton. A few of the older town men: Sutter, of the General Store; and Rafe Nadden, who ran the feed barn; and old Mr. Toller, the banker. But that was all.

A little breathlessly, she began to realize that, except for Jack Fulton, she might be a wall-flower.

Perhaps the men from her ranch were avoiding her only because she was their mistress; they wouldn't want to be suspected of bootlicking. Thinking that, she was about to single out one of them and actually ask him to dance with her. No doubt, that would make all the rest of them feel at ease about asking her.

Then, suddenly, she saw Bill Thane dancing with one of the girls of the town—a dark-haired, vital little beauty who was obviously the belle of the ball. And, hardly knowing why, she decided proudly that she would ask none of them.

She sat out one dance, alone, vividly conscious that her dress was more fashionable and more charming than any of the other women's. She knew she was an attractive girl. It angered her and puzzled her to realize that she was sitting against the wall.

THE next dance, Jack Fulton was there. His face was still criss-crossed with sticking plaster, as a result of hitting the bars of the corral when he had been thrown—and also, she remembered hotly, because of Bill Thane's blow. But Jack was handsome, vitally so. There was about him a fraction of the intense masculinity which she had felt in Bill Thane, but there was a softer thing also, a moist alluringness about his mouth and eyes, a less stubborn hardness about the set of his jaw, more grace and attentiveness in his manner.

And he danced a waltz beautifully. . . . She told him that, smiling at him softly, as they danced.

He smiled back at her, and there was something in the dark depths of his eyes that thrilled her. "Anybody could dance with you," he whispered. "I only wish I could have every dance this evenin'."

She was about to laugh that proposal off, lightly, as an ordinary ballroom compliment. Just then she met Bill Thane's eye. He was dancing with the dark-haired girl. As Gloria looked at him over Jack's shoulder, his eyes were on her, with a curious expression in them—an expression at once hard and puzzled and angry.

It was that look which decided her. "I wish you could have every dance, too," she said softly to Jack Fulton.

His head jerked toward her, a look of surprise and dawning triumph in his eyes. "Why, then," he said smoothly, "it's a bet. You will have!"

It was because of that that she refused Shorty Williams, one of her punchers, when he came over a little later to ask her to dance. And, having begun that way, she continued, ignoring the little inner warning of regret in her heart, when Slats Weems tried it also.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I have all the rest of the dances with Jack."

Slats' bony face colored deeply and he backed away in confusion. After that, she could see Bill Thane looking at her wonderingly. There was a similar look of concealed, polite wonder in the eyes of all the people at the dance.

She realized that she had created a scandal, and there was a part of her which was surprised and a part which was perversely glad of it.

All the more so since her dances with Jack Fulton were a joy. He danced so smoothly and well and whispered things into her ears that set her heart to pounding, although she received them calmly on the surface.

A little later, Jack suggested that they walk outside to cool off. For a moment, she hesitated, seeing the excitement in his eyes and knowing that she might be let in for something that she was not yet ready for.

But then she said, "Yes," telling herself that she could handle anything that developed, and yet with her pulses thumping because there was, definitely, an attraction about this dark man.

They went out through the back door and into the dim, starlit yard, with its dark confusion of hipshot horses and buckboards with their tongues on the ground.

Jack led her casually past all this to the far corner of the yard, into the deep shadow of a smaller building some fifty yards from the main hall.

They stood there for a minute, looking at the stars. Gloria felt Jack's shoulder pressing against hers as they leaned on the fence. In the soft darkness, she felt his eyes on her. She turned her head to meet his gaze, surprising in it an expression

which gave her the idea that he was estimating her in a way she did not like.

But that expression fled his eyes so quickly that she wondered whether it had been there at all. There was nothing left in his down-bent gaze but a kind of admiration, a kind of adoration, to which, despite herself, her pulses leaped.

"Gloria," he said softly, "Gloria—"

A voice, at once soft and curt, cut him off. It came from behind them, but Gloria did not have to turn to know that it was Bill Thane's voice.

"I'd like to talk to you a minute, Jack," he said gently, "if Miss Carson don't mind."

GLORIA could feel Jack's tall, strong form stiffen. Slowly he turned. "You come at a poor time, Bill," he purred, and, somehow, there was danger beneath the velvet of his tone.

"I regret that," Bill said, and Gloria seemed to detect a small run of temper in his soft voice. "But I figure it had better be done right away."

Fulton hesitated, then snapped, "All right." In a milder tone, he added, "If you'll excuse us, Gloria."

Gloria was suddenly angry. "What's it all about?" she demanded. "If it has anything to do with the ranch . . ."

Both men were silent.

"Well," Gloria insisted, challengingly, "*has* it anything to do with the ranch?"

Bill Thane said, hard-voiced and curt, "Yes. I'm firing Fulton."

Gloria went rigid with shock and unbelief. "You firing him? Why?"

Thane shrugged, his big shoulders moving in quick impatience. "Say I don't like the way he acts," he said curtly. "That'll cover it, I reckon."

Sheer outrage flared up in Gloria's mind. "You don't like the way he acts!" she mocked him hotly. "That's a fine reason to fire anybody! But I happen to be owner of the Moonstone. And I haven't any idea of firing Jack Fulton."

Jack Fulton laughed sharply, derisively, at Thane. "You always have been too big for your pants, Bill," he said. "I reckon this is the time for you to shrink up an' act like a normal man."

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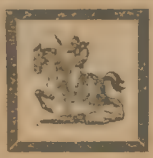

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In the darkness, she could see Thane's big hands ball up into fists. He hesitated a brief instant, then his voice whipped out, harder than she had ever heard it. "You want a better reason—then I'll give it to you. I suspicion Fulton of bein' the inside man for the rustlers that are beginnin' to steal you poor. I've thought it for some time, an' I've just heard somethin' that makes me surer of it than ever. He's pullin' out, an' he's pullin' out now!"

Beside Gloria, Jack Fulton had gone tense. His right hand lifted to the lapel of his coat.

"Bill, you damn—" His voice broke off abruptly.

"I know you're carryin' a hideout gun in a shoulder holster," Bill's voice snapped, hard, contemptuous. "If you think you'd like to use it, go ahead. I'm heeled."

All at once Gloria knew there was death in this quiet dark air, that it hovered over them on a sweep of black, throbbing wings. Some profound instinct told her that, although nothing in her experience had taught her that men might actually kill one another over a quarrel like this. The back of her mouth was suddenly dry and her throat stopped, so that she was incapable of speaking.

There was a moment of rigid, deadly silence, during which she could hear the rasp of Jack's quick breath. Then his hand slid down from his coat lapel, harmlessly.

"I'll let you get away with this, for now," he said, thick-voiced. "But you're goin' to offer proof of what you say, or by hell—"

Gloria found her voice, her anger coming back redoubled because she had been so frightened. "You can give your proof to me, right now," she whipped out at Bill Thane.

Thane gave a tough, mirthless laugh. "If I had the kind of proof that could stand up in court, I'd have this good-lookin' buzzard decoratin' a limb by now. Just let it go that I've got enough to convince me that I don't want him around any more. He's fired, an' that's all there is to it."

"And I say he's not fired!"

"Then I am, lady. You can find yourself another foreman." He stood there, glowering at her a second, then went on, tight-lipped, "Ben Urquhart was my friend. I told him I'd try to see that you got along, but I reckon there are other ways to do it." He turned a profound, somehow brooding look on Jack Fulton. "I'll be seein' you, hombre," he said carefully, and turned on his heel, stalking off.

CHAPTER FOUR

Treacherous Lips

GLORIA found herself suddenly shaken and regretful, and at the same time there was fear in her. Something about that look and that last sentence disturbed her profoundly. Instinct told her that in that moment Bill Thane had been more deadly, more dangerous, than before. And all at once she saw that she had handled this thing badly, had let her temper run away with her and make a fool of her. She turned swiftly to Jack Fulton, put her hand on his chest.

"Jack, do me a favor—go home now, will you? Just go now quickly."

"I don't want to run from that—"

"No. Please. I ask it. I—I'll handle this. Just get on your horse and ride away without saying a word. Won't you?"

"Well—if you ask it." His tone was nicely reluctant.

She did not find Bill Thane, as she had expected, about to get on his own horse. Instead, he was inside, dancing with the dark-haired girl.

For an instant, anger, and something that even she recognized as jealousy, flared up in Gloria. She stood there watching them, breathing a little quickly, and

then she made up her mind. If this unpredictable man thought he could whipsaw her like that, she'd deal with him on his own terms!

When the music stopped she walked across the room to them. "Please forgive me," she said sweetly to the other girl. "Something important has come up that I've got to discuss with—with Bill—about the ranch. Will you excuse him for a minute?"

There was one dynamite-filled second when she thought that Bill Thane was going to refuse. Then he followed her outside, while the room stared at them.

She put on her most ingratiating air, letting her hand fall on his arm.

"I'm so sorry, Bill," she said, "that I acted that way. Please—you're not going to hold it against me? You—you couldn't leave me without—without a foreman, could you? Won't you forget the whole thing?"

He was staring at her, but she could see him soften. After a moment he drew a deep breath. "Sure," he said. "Sure, if it's understood that I've got charge of the hirin' an' firin' of my own men."

Her mind worked fast. It wouldn't do to let him know now that she had no intention of firing Jack Fulton. "Of course you have, Bill," she said. "It's—it's just that I didn't want us to be unfair. Let's don't talk about that any more now. This is a night to be happy."

He was looking at her with a queer, quizzical expression in his eyes, and there was an ominous hardening about his mouth. She knew that he was suspecting her and laughing at her—and that she was a long way from winning.

Quick feminine perversity flared up in her. Somehow, she would mold this hard man to her will!

She said swiftly, "Bill, I told Ned Ferguson that somebody else would drive me back. Jack was going to, but—but he's not now. Won't you?"

She could feel him tense, resisting her. Then he said, with a cool politeness, "Why, surely, ma'am . . ."

She sat in the buckboard by his side, with a queer contentment in her. She was like a soldier resting on his arms, yet knowing that the fight was by no means over. She had made him dance with her. She had found and told him shamelessly that Bill was driving her home. But though she had won every engagement, as far as appearances went, she had won nothing as far as getting to the inside feelings of this strange man. He was hard, defensive and cold. Now, with the matched team running along before them, snuffing the night air of the range eagerly, as though they could already smell their comfortable stalls, he was altogether silent and unresponsive.

All the mixed emotions of that evening began to stir in her—the sense of being an outsider, jealousy of that dark-haired girl who was so popular and so vital, the ungovernable surge of her pulses when she had stood with Jack Fulton in the starlight, her anger at this man at her side, and her failure with him. She was still failing with Bill Thane. He had won over her by giving in to everything she wanted, without giving anything of himself. The hard wall of his personality was wholly unbreached. He was even more silent, even more indifferent than he had been that first day.

The quick, angry perversity which had been running through her made her suddenly determined to get at him, to force him to show some feeling. Imperceptibly, wickedly, she eased toward him, until her shoulder touched his. Then, as though she were nodding sleepily, she let her cheek fall against his shoulder, the soft fragrance of her hair brush his cheek.

SHE could feel him stiffen, and a little, shadowy smile of triumph flickered about her soft mouth. He was feeling it,

all right. He was not so insensible as he seemed.

Abruptly, she lifted her head, as though she had just wakened, and found him looking at her, sidelong and suspicious.

She smiled at him innocently. "I was sleepy," she said. And then she made her grin impish. "But it was nice."

He slid a look at her and then returned his attention to the horses' ears.

"Bill," she said softly, "don't you like me at all."

His face remained rigid, straight before him. "Why, sure. Miss Carson," he said politely.

She moved her lips closer to his cheek. "Bill, look at me. Do you mean that?"

Almost reluctantly, he turned his head, looked into her eyes. Her mouth was close to his, inviting. For a fraction of a second which seemed endless, it seemed to her that he was not going to kiss her. Then his lips closed on hers, hard, in a kiss that had something unforgiving and hard and hostile in it.

She let her lips crush softly on his, meaning to take them away in a moment. Then, breathless, she found them held there by some fiery magnetism which she had not expected, which she had never dreamed of.

His right arm slid up about her shoulders, drawing her close, making the kiss harder and closer. As in some wild, flaming dream, she was aware that his left arm also was around her. Her body was drawn up against his, her breasts crushed against his chest, so that the contact was pain and a sudden turbulent ecstasy.

Fire coursed through her veins; her will power drained from her. Her brain was a torrent of mad, sweet yearning which this moment fulfilled and yet left unsatisfied. Her whole being, nerves and body and blood and sensation, seemed to draw up into one core of quivering madness, drew up and broke into wild waves, violent and racking, that subsided like dying music, that left her spent and helpless and broken.

Her body went limp in his arms. Tears blinded her, overspilling, sliding down her cheeks.

It was as though their warm wetness calmed the fierce passion in his heart. He took his lips from hers, loosened his embrace. His hand slid upward, stroking her neck, her cheek, with a tenderness as sudden and profound as his passion had been.

Then, wordlessly, he turned to take up the reins again.

She sat back on her side of the seat, trying to summon her thoughts, trying to recreate the proud, untouched self which had always been hers. Through the burning sensitivity which was her new being, the thought came that somehow she had trapped and betrayed herself. She had been hoist by her own petard. Wishing perversely to move and conquer this man, it was herself who had been taught things that she had not dreamed of, that she had not counted on, that even now seemed to her more like a pressing, urgent dream than a reality.

Anger began to grow in her, a feeble, almost tearful anger. And then, as this wordless ride went on, her wrecked pride rose in a kind of unforgiving ferocity. Some force beyond her understanding had made a fool of her, but she would make Bill Thane suffer for it. Let him wait and see!

So it was that she told him goodnight coldly, and then went to bed, to lie awake and remember the tenderness, the utter sweet tenderness of his hand on her neck and cheek. . . .

NEXT morning, though, she waked with something like a panic of anxiety riding her, and her anger coming up defensively again. For it had come to her when she opened her eyes that she was almost sure to find that Jack Fulton had been fired.

Only, it wasn't so. Fulton was still there, swaggeringly so. An immense relief, and yet a kind of puzzlement, too, entered her heart. Bill Thane had been generous, too big to take advantage of her weakness of the night before. Or had he? Maybe he realized he had accused Jack Fulton hastily and falsely.

Wisely, she made no comment, but merely let things take their course.

For two days, that. Then, one morning while the stars were still bright in the sky and the velvet of the sky deep black, she woke suddenly, conscious that some sound had disturbed her.

She sat up in bed in the darkness, ears straining. At first she heard nothing. Then, there was another sound, a soft sound, as of a horse's hoof in dust and the creak of leather. Somebody was saddling up at the corral.

She got up quickly and went to the window. Outside, the night was moonless, but the brilliance of the stars made a soft, clear light for dark-accustomed eyes.

A man was at the corral, just swinging into the saddle. It was Bill Thane! What could he be doing at this hour? Could he be quitting—going away? Her heart fell, stupidly, like a bruised stone, at this thought.

She watched him as he rode off, disappeared into the darkness. For a moment, the idea came to her to dress, to follow after him, but she told herself that that would be ridiculous. Besides, she would lose him before . . .

All at once she became aware that another figure had emerged from the bunkhouse on silent feet, was going toward the corral. Jack Fulton! What was he doing—following Bill?

Sudden, ugly suspicion leaped into her mind. Was it Bill who was rustling her cattle—and had he accused Jack merely because he thought Jack suspected him?

With sudden decision, she whipped about in the darkness to find her clothes. She would find out for herself. If Jack was following Bill, then she would follow Jack. If she hurried, she would have time.

CHAPTER FIVE

Western Love Is Strong

ON THAT sudden impulse, it came to her afterwards, the whole course of her life hung. All her happiness was staked there, on a decision which she reached without thought and surely foolishly, since how could a tenderfoot girl

"TELL ME WITH A KISS when you fall in love with me," Dana said to Lacey, and Lacey smiled, for falling in love with Dana was no part of her plan for revenge. Lacey wanted Dana to fall in love with her and then she wanted to make him suffer as poor little Patricia had suffered before her very strange death. But Lacey fell into her own trap and to her horror she discovered that she, too, loved the man she blamed for Patricia's death. It's by Mary Fleet.

Then there is *Second Love* by Phyllis Gordon Demarest; *Rainbow Round Her Heart* by Vina Lawrence; *Love Ship* by Violet Gordon; *Lady Wolf* by Claire Pomeroy; *All's Fair* by Helen Ahern; and *Wedding for Three* by Fran Welsh all coming in the June issue.

Zamora will tell your fortune; Leo King will give you the astrological forecast for next month; there are some grand new patterns and a big department of Pen Pals. Altogether it's a grand issue.

Love BOOK MAGAZINE

On Sale April 20th!

hope to follow these men in the dark on a strange range?

Yet she went, caught out her own horse for the first time in her life, swiftly got the saddle on him. Jack Fulton was lost in the darkness. She strained her eyes, and by sheer luck made out the faint loom of a figure against the low ridge two hundred yards away. She turned her pony's head in that direction and rode cautiously.

How she followed that figure ahead of her in the darkness without being discovered herself, she never afterwards knew. Indeed, she thought she had lost him entirely when dawn came into the eastern sky, but then she caught a glimpse of him—at least, she supposed it was him—entering some brush a full half mile away.

Just ahead of her was an arroyo with a deep sandy bed. She turned into it swiftly, putting her horse to a gallop.

She came out of the arroyo near what she judged was the brush into which Jack had disappeared. But he was not in sight, and she rode on, searching blindly. Then, abruptly, she came onto a scene which took her breath. Beyond the brush was grazing range, and in the open was a man squatted by the side of a fire, with a thrown cow before him and branding iron in his hand!

At first she thought the man was Bill Thane, but she quickly realized it wasn't. As she watched, Bill Thane emerged from a clump of bushes, on foot, his gun in his hand. She saw the man at the fire stiffen and start to reach for a gun at his side, then freeze.

It was that moment she saw Jack Fulton. He rode out to the edge of the bluff, about fifty yards behind Bill Thane, and swung a rifle to his shoulder.

Some movement or flicker of the eyes from the man in front of him must have warned Bill of danger, for he moved suddenly, just as the rifle cracked. And he kept moving, in a fast, rolling dive.

It seemed to her that he had been hit, but she could not be sure, for he kept moving fast, like a man wholly in command of himself. Gloria saw Jack lever the rifle again, and the man by the fire flung up his gun.

Both weapons cracked out at once and both kicked dust in the spot where Bill had been standing the moment before.

It was like the beginning of some wild, swift drama to which Gloria was a spectator, but over which she had no control and in which she had no part. Except that she knew then that everything for her was at stake . . . and that tragedy—deep and personal to her—was stalking this morning range.

As Bill Thane disappeared suddenly in the screen of brush, Gloria heard a voice screaming and knew suddenly that it was her own. She knew also that she had come unarmed and that she was helpless.

Yet that scream set something off. The man by the fire looked startledly in her direction and then raced for his horse. He flung into the saddle. Shots sounded in the bushes at the same time, and then there was the thud of hoofs and a continuing trail of some hidden rider through the brush.

And then she could make out the sounds of a following rider. Gloria knew that that following rider was Bill Thane, and the breath went out of her in a great sigh of relief. She sat her horse there while a sudden gust of dawn wind beat at her cheeks and whipped up sparks from the fire the rustler had left a moment ago.

Then she kicked her horse into motion.

THE rustler was riding straight toward what looked like a blank cliff, and in a minute Jack Fulton broke out of the brush on his trail. The rustler looked back and waved. Then Bill Thane broke out of the brush, riding low in the saddle, his six-guns blasting, making tiny, violent, puffy sounds on the morning air. It was like a

scene from a play viewed from a long distance.

Jack Fulton's horse went down suddenly, sending Jack rolling, to lie motionless in the grass.

The other rustler turned in his saddle and the thin crack of his Winchester came back viciously to Gloria's ears. Her own horse was in motion now, racing across the range, the whip of the wind against her face suddenly fierce and cutting. Dust whirled up in her eyes. The next report of the rifle was faint, hardly audible. She rode on, and as she passed the branding fire, flame flared up and smoke struck her nostrils. The wind had set the grass on fire! "I hope that poor steer doesn't get burned," she thought.

Then she was past and up to where Jack Fulton lay, unconscious. She saw a stone on the range near his head and guessed that he had been knocked senseless by that. She hoped that he was not too badly hurt and there was an impulse in her to stop. But Bill was ahead and in danger, so she flashed by.

In front of her, she could see them both. Bill was closer to the rustler now, and both were shooting. Evidently Bill's horse was faster. She saw that the rustler was making for a hidden ravine mouth in the cliffs ahead and that Bill was about to cut him off.

The rustler turned in the saddle and levelled his rifle carefully, taking time for his shot. Gloria's heart cried out agonizedly and there was a desperate sense of helplessness on her such as she had never felt. She cried out involuntarily. The Winchester cracked and she saw Bill jerk a little in the saddle.

Her heart stopped. But he kept on. His sixgun was in his hand, but he was not using it. Again the rifle cracked. This time Bill rode on without moving. There was something cold, hard and implacable in his posture which sent a breathless thrill through Gloria. And then, as the rustler turned for another shot, Bill's hand lifted and the sixgun blasted. The rustler seemed to stiffen in the saddle, and then he hurled outward like a flung sack of meal.

When Gloria came up, Bill had already ridden up to him and was heading back toward Gloria.

"What are you doing out here?" he demanded, his voice thick with irritation.

"I—I just came," Gloria said breathlessly.

"Well, come back then," he said grimly. "We got to hurry."

She saw, with a gasp, that the range behind her was in flames. Swept by that sudden hard wind, the fire had caught fast. And a second later she knew they were in danger.

"Ride off to the right," Bill commanded sharply.

She obeyed, hardly knowing why he had told her to. After a little she realized that he was not riding with her but was angling in toward the blaze. She started to veer back toward him, but he shouted at her so fiercely that she swung over again and resumed her course.

They were separated by a full hundred yards before she realized what he was doing, before she remembered Jack Fulton. Bill was going to get Jack. He had shot Jack's horse and left it senseless on the ground, but he could not let a man burn to death. He was going back for him!

It was a deadly risk! She began to edge her horse back toward the fire.

But it was too late. They were already opposite where Jack lay. By some incredible good fortune, the fire had swept around him on both sides, leaving a kind of horseshoe of unburned grass where he lay. And through the open end of this horseshoe, Bill drove his voice.

Jack, she saw, had already come to consciousness. He had staggered to his feet, staring wildly around him, taking in his situation.

Bill pulled his mount to a rearing halt and flung himself from the saddle. Opposite the open end of the horseshoe, Gloria pulled up, appalled by the flames, which were closing in, and knowing that there was nothing she could do at this moment. It was touch and go as to whether Bill and the man he meant to rescue could race to that closing entrance before the flames cut them off.

Jack Fulton saw it, too. His staring eyes looked at the narrow margin between him and death. Suddenly he pulled away from Bill Thane—and struck.

Unbelieving, Gloria saw his fist lick toward Bill's jaw, saw Bill fall, saw Jack reach down and grab Bill's sixgun out of its holster and then fling himself into the saddle.

IN A dazed flash of understanding, Gloria knew that his motive had been twofold. He did not intend to be captured as a rustler; and, furthermore, he was doubtful whether a double loaded horse could make it through that closing entrance of flame.

That understanding flashed across her mind as she screamed and struck spurs to her mount, racing toward that maw of fiery death. She passed Jack Fulton in full flight at the entrance. His face was contorted with rage and fear. As she passed him his sixgun flicked upward and for an instant she believed that he was about to kill her. But something held his hand, and they raced past each other.

Heat shriveled her skin in a paralyzing blast. The terrifying crackle and roar of a prairie fire was in her ears.

When she got to Bill he was already on his feet. Wordless, he flung himself up behind her. She roweled her panicky, rearing mount.

Then, desperately, she saw that the opening was closing, had closed.

She felt Bill's hand over her mouth and nose. "Don't breathe," he yelled.

There was a blinding, blazing, searing moment, when they plunged through the ring of fire, and then they were in the open, with Bill beating out the sparks that had caught in her clothes.

"Ride straight ahead," he gasped at her.

To their right, she could see Jack Fulton, riding hard, angling toward the hills, taking his chance with the onsweep of the fire, to get free. And then she saw his horse go down, flinging over in a somersault that bespoke a broken leg!

She saw Jack fall, spraddling, and shut her eyes. When she opened them, he was staggering to his feet, running. She tried to swing the horse.

"Bill!" she cried. "We've got—"

Bill's hand caught the reins, straightened the horse out. "Don't be a fool," he said roughly.

And then, almost before she could protest, the flames reached Jack Fulton, roared over him. They could not have been in time. Indeed, they needed all the speed of the overloaded horse to reach safety themselves.

The rest was a curious, heroic nightmare. There were men riding toward them—their own men. And, incredulous, she saw that they were bent on stopping this fire, and that Bill Thane never questioned for a moment that that was the thing to do.

There was a fierce confusion which had a strange kind of order in it. There was the slaughter of beef, and a back-fire, and green wet hides drawn at the gallop along the edge of the back-fire to keep it from spreading. There was heat and blistered skin and singed hair and blackened faces. And, above all, there were tough unyielding men who dared death and fought like relentless demons.

And there was a girl who fought, too—and understood, at last.

Since she had been on this range, in this Western country which had been so long in her dreams and which had been

willed to her, she had heard talk of drought and of blizzards, of cloudbursts and of tornadoes, and she had listened, at once impressed and unbelieving. She had met with violence and tenderness and crookedness, and a kind of unforgiving integrity which was of the essence of this land. She had seen sudden death and attempted murder and a vengeance of the land itself, which was more relentless and unforgiving than that of the men in it. She had seen common, simple men fight like heroes to save the range and the cattle which belonged to her. And now she knew.

She had come here an ignorant, overproud girl, with little understanding and less tolerance. And she had nearly been punished cruelly for it. But now she knew. This West of hers was not very polite. It was brutal—with a brutality, a hard readiness, which the violence of the land itself demanded. It was tough, with a magnificent, humorous toughness which was in itself a form of unassuming heroism. And it was tender—tender as the soft strength of a true man's hand on a woman's cheek.

Very quietly, not wanting praise, she knew that she also was fit for it. She could read that in the eyes of her men, by whose side she had fought fire. There was a great pride in her because of that.

It was a pride so strong and humble that when she summoned Bill Thane to her that night, when the stars were big and she had the soft, scented confidence of her prettiest gown about her, she merely said simply, "Bill, I can't flirt with you again. Not now. I know better now. I've been very ignorant and stupid. Can you —can you like me, anyhow."

SHE could feel his body tense, there in the dark, and his voice was a little hoarse, almost resentful, when he spoke.

"You know how I feel about you, Gloria. But, good Lord, I can't—" He broke off and spread his hands suddenly. "What do you want me to be—a groveling fortune hunter?"

The tension went out of her, and about her heart there was a hot sweet warmth such as she had never expected to know. And so the laughter came bubbling out of her, unbidden, soft and mocking and infinitely tender.

"Oh, Bill," she breathed. "Do you suppose anyone could think it of you? Of *you?* Please, I need you so badly, Bill."

Then his steel-strong arms were around her and her body was melting into his. And there was no doubt or pain or loneliness anywhere—only an ecstasy to which the high great stars seemed to throb in unison. . . .

THE END

An unforgettable new Sun-Dance novelette

Star Dust

By Isabel Stewart Way

CHAPTER ONE

Bittersweet Kiss

LORRIE'S rich voice didn't rise, but there was infinite scorn and dignity in her low words: "Sir, I had rather starve than accept the charity you offer! Charity?" Her voice deepened a bit, and she pushed the heavy dark hair back from her forehead. "No! You cannot defame the sweet name of charity, by applying it to such as you offer. The bread of infamy! The false sweetness of sin that——"

She hesitated, and her younger sister prompted: "——*that turns to bitter ashes*

and Make-Believe

Lorrie clung to Thad. "No!" she screamed. "No, you've got no reason for hurting Thad."

"I love you. . ." ran the thrilling lines in the frontier Sun-Dance play. . . . And Lorrie, like a good trouper, spoke them as if she meant them—to the man whose bittersweet off-stage kisses had made her betray her own fugitive father!

in the mouth! . . . Oh, but you were grand in that part, Lorrie! And you were so young when you played it. I can remember dad drilling you in it. Dad—"

Jenny's voice broke, and glistening moisture showed in her eyes. With a quick exclamation, Lorrie hurried over, gathered the younger girl in her arms. "Don't, darling," she said. "Old Doc said you weren't to worry. You've got to get well, honey. That's the most important thing."

"But dad—" Jenny sobbed.

"He's all right," Lorrie told her, though her own brown eyes were filled with pain as she stared across the other girl's shoulder, toward the distant hills. "And he'll stay safe, till this murder charge is cleared

up—for dad never killed Dave Corrigan, any more than he and Dave robbed the Blackjack! So don't worry, darling. . . . We're lucky, after all, dear," she went on, stroking the yellow hair. "We're able to be near dad, and I have a good job. You're getting well, and here we are in Sun-Dance, living in the same little house our mother lived in, when she was a girl. We're home, honey!"

"I guess so," Jenny said, in a small voice. "But that awful thing happened here—right in Sun-Dance. . . . And besides," she added wistfully, "it's hard to think of any place being home, except a theatre."

Lorrie laughed and hugged Jenny closer, but there was a tightness about her own throat. For she and Jenny had been born to footlights, to canvas scenery and draughty theatres, and she had missed it all, terribly, these past few months.

"We'll be back in a theatre this very week!" she prophesied. "I've got a surprise for you. A troupe is coming to Sun-Dance, to play in Fancy Black's new opera house, and Old Doc says you can go."

Jenny forgot her tears, to smile. "Really, Lorrie?"

"Of course! They're going to be here a week, do all the old plays we used to do. I've got to go to the store now, and I'll bring you one of the handbills. Then you'll see what they're putting on."

But when Lorrie got a handbill from the counter in the General Store, and read it over, she didn't save it for Jenny. Instead, she stared at it a moment from eyes gone suddenly wide in a pale lovely face, then she crumpled it, let it drop from her nerveless fingers. Even then she could see the pictured face of the troupe's leading man, looking straight at her.

"Thad Corrigan—Dave's brother—coming to Sun-Dance!" she murmured. "Maybe he knows that dad's here, and is coming to kill him!"

FEAR filled her as she walked along the board sidewalk toward home; fear and ugly remembrance. She thought of that awful moment when loud voices and clamor had awakened her from sleep. The sheriff and a mob had come to the little cottage after her father and Dave Corrigan, a member of the troupe. Dion and Dave, they said, had robbed the Blackjack, a gambling den and dancehall; they had taken the whole evening's earnings, and escaped.

It had been preposterous to Lorrie, but the townspeople, always suspicious of stage-folks, had been quick to believe; especially when they found that Dion Arnold hadn't been home after the performance.

Lorrie would never forget those long hours; nor would she forget that next morning when she heard that Dave Corrigan had been found dead on the empty stage . . . shot with her father's gun. Her father had gone; he had shot Dave and run off with the stolen gold, people said.

It was a week later that Lorrie got the brief message from her father. He had escaped from the gathering mob, he said, and was safely hidden in a cabin in Wailing Creek Canyon, near the Widow—one of the Seven Sister Mountains that rimmed Chula Valley. He would stay there until the robbery charge against him could be cleared. He didn't mention the death of Dave Corrigan.

Her father had told her not to mention his whereabouts to anyone, else Lorrie might have told Fancy Black, owner of the Blackjack. For she had convinced Black that neither her father nor Dave had robbed his Blackjack, and Fancy Black had offered to help, in any way. He had given Lorrie work, singing in the Blackjack, enabling her to provide for little Jenny, ill from the shock. But in spite of his kindness, Lorrie had to pretend not to know where her father was, because of her promise.

Lep Hardy, who managed the Blackjack for Fancy Black, was kind, too; it was Lep who had told Lorrie only last week that Thad Corrigan, Dave's younger brother, had vowed he was going to trace down Dave's killer—clear Dave's name—and wreak vengeance. And now. . . . Thad was coming to Sun-Dance, as leading man for the stock company, brought in to play Fancy Black's Opera House.

The creak of wheels caught Lorrie's attention, and she turned. She saw the show troupe caravan coming down the single main street. Desperately she searched each face of the group who rode in the three-seated surrey. Tears misted her eyes as she watched; tears of homesickness. Just so, through all her days with her father's company, had she traveled from one small town to another. Just so had her father ridden into Sun-Dance, twenty-two years ago, to meet the girl who left her home and promised husband, to become the wife of a roving actor!

Relief came to Lorrie. Dave's brother was not in the troupe, after all. She would have known him from his picture. There had been a mistake.

"Good afternoon, ma'am!" spoke a vibrant voice from beside her.

She looked up, startled, to find herself staring into the lean handsome face of Thad Corrigan! He had been riding in one of the wagons that carried trunks, scenery, and props.

"Aren't you Lorrie Arnold?" he asked.

FOR an instant, Lorrie thought of flight, of running away from the steady blue gaze that seemed to be probing into her very thoughts. Then she flung back her dark head and faced him; a gallant slim girl in a blue calico dress, tight of bodice and full of skirt, yet revealing every line of her young figure.

"Yes, I'm Lorrie Arnold," she said, low. "And you're Thad Corrigan."

He leaped down. "I knew you by your pictures," he said. "My brother Dave sent them to me." His tones were husky. "You're lovelier than they showed," he added, and caught her two hands in his.

His touch sent strange thrills coursing through Lorrie's veins. Her heart beat faster, and the warm blood spilled into her cheeks.

"Lorrie," he said, quickly, "I've got to see you—talk with you. May I walk home with you?"

Lorrie hesitated. Dimly a warning was beating in her mind. . . . *This man is your enemy—he means no good!* She looked up up at him, a refusal on her lips.

Then she caught her breath, nodded. And, driven by some force within herself, she added recklessly, "And you'll stay for supper! Jenny, my little sister, and I would love it."

It was a terrible thing to do, Lorrie knew that, to invite him to break bread under their roof, but she couldn't help it. Anyhow, as fear caught at her, she reasoned, it would be wise to find out just what Thad intended doing.

And then, gradually, both reason and fear slipped away. All the way home, it was like walking to music. And through the supper hour, she knew a strange happiness in waiting on Thad, watching the way his fair hair waved back from his forehead, hearing his deep vibrant voice. Even Jenny soon forgot her first worry.

"Oh, I wish I didn't have to work tonight!" Lorrie cried. "It would be fun to go on talking about the theatre." For, as if by mutual consent, they had spoken of little else, all this time.

"You work?" Thad asked, in surprise.

Lorrie nodded. "I sing for Mr. Black." And her eyes asked him not to question her any more before Jenny.

Later, when they stepped into the yard for a while, Lorrie explained. "Jenny doesn't know I sing in—well, the Blackjack dancehall and saloon. And she mustn't know."

"Lorrie! You're singing in a place like that—with all your talent!" Thad cried. "Lorrie, you can't do it! I'm going to take you out of that place—I want to look after you." He caught her hands again, held them in a terrific grasp.

Lorrie's heart was singing such a mad tune, she couldn't even hear the note of warning her mind was trying to sound. She leaned toward Thad, was dizzied when his arms drew her close.

"Lorrie," he went on, "I suppose it sounds crazy . . . but I love you. I've loved you since I first saw your picture. I've dreamed about you, and now my dream has come true. Lorrie, can you believe—that I love you?"

"Yes—oh, yes!" she whispered. "I can believe it . . . because I love you, too."

SHE hadn't known she was going to say the words, but once they were out, she knew they were the truth. She loved Thad Corrigan. He had stepped right into her heart, when he leaped from the wagon, and took her two hands in his, and her gaze met his eyes.

"You sweet!" Thad drew her so close she could hear the thud of his heart beneath her cheek, as she laid her dark head against his flannel shirt. "Kiss me, Lorrie, darlin'!"

Obediently Lorrie lifted her face until their lips met. Girl-like, she had often dreamed of love, but never had she guessed it could be like this . . . such ecstasy, such bliss. Under the magic of Thad's kisses, she was lifted high above the dusty rangeland world, and carried very close to the stars—to heaven, itself. Tumultuous emotions flowed through her veins; every nerve tingled keenly, with the awareness of this man who held her in his arms.

"Lorrie!" he said, at last, as his big hand stroked her hair. "You love me—you'll trust me?"

"Yes, Thad—oh, yes!"

He was silent a moment; then he said, "Lorrie, I came to Sun-Dance for a purpose. There's something I must do. If you'll trust me enough—help me, darlin'—"

She drew away from him. The sweetness and ecstasy of the moment had fled. Fear was like a drum, beating out its warning to Lorrie.

"What do you want?" she asked, her tones lifeless.

"I want you to take me to your father, Lorrie," he said.

Again there was silence, while Lorrie stared at Thad, as if she had awakened from a drugged sleep. Her eyes were wide, startled.

"So you want me—to turn traitor?" she said slowly. "You work upon my feelings—my love—for that!"

"Lorrie, you can't say that!" he cried out. "I—"

"I am saying it." Bitter memory was prodding her on, now—knowledge of her own perfidy. "You made a vow. I heard about it! That's why you came to Sun-Dance."

"Yes," he said steadily. "I swore I'd clear my brother's name and hunt down his killer. Well, I'm going to do just that. Dave never stole a penny. And your father—"

"My father didn't kill Dave," Lorrie said, her dark head flung back. "I'm going to prove it, some day. When I do, then I'll take you to my father, with a gun at your back. I'll take you there, and make you apologize to him, on your knees." She was lashing herself on, trying to make up for her weakness. "Until then—I don't even want to see you again."

"Lorrie!" he cried out. "You don't mean that! You—can't!"

It was hard to steel herself against the pleading in his eyes, but she had to be true to her trust. This man was her father's enemy. For a little while, she had forgotten, but she must never forget again.

"I mean it, Thad," she said, in clear even tones.

Then they just stood there, staring at each other, as if neither could ever speak, ever move again. They stood there silently . . . until a strange whispering voice spoke from out of the shadows.

"Lorrie, I have come to accompany you to work." And Fancy Black, his parchment-like face gleaming in the moonlight, stepped up beside her, took her arm.

Whispering were those tones, yet they cut the silence with a queer sharpness. Lorrie's startled gaze went to the elderly man.

CHAPTER TWO

Tar-and-Feather Talk

A STRANGE appearing man was Fancy Black, who owned most of the town of Sun-Dance. His black broadcloth suit hung loosely on his thin cadaverous frame. There was a strange deadness to the opaque eyes that were regarding her now; she wouldn't have known whether he was angry at her, or not, had it not been for the smile that curved his thin lips.

"You are late, my child, and I was worried," he told her, in his precise tone of voice. "I see you have a guest."

"This is Thad Corrigan," she said, low-toned, to keep her voice from trembling. "He's with the stock company that came here today."

"Ah, yes, the leading man." Fancy Black regarded the other with his expressionless stare. "Good evening, Mr. Corrigan." And with a slight ceremonious bow, he led her down the street toward the brightly lighted Blackjack. "They're calling for you, my dear," he went on, "and when they find that you will not be entertaining them next week, they will be doubly eager to hear you tonight."

"Not—entertaining them?" she echoed. "You mean—"

"You are to appear with the stock company. Their leading lady received word that her mother was ill, and I explained that we had a little actress who could take her place, if she wished to go to her mother. She left on the evening stage. I thought it might please you, Lorrie."

"Oh—thank you!" she gasped. But she was thinking of what it would mean. . . . The leading lady, playing with Thad, looking into his eyes, hearing him talk—held in his arms, in love scenes. At the thought, memory of his real kisses returned, filling her with a quivering warmth. "I—I'm grateful," she finished lamely.

"I know you will enjoy it," Fancy Black husked, "even though we will miss you at the Blackjack. And it will be well for you to be in a position to watch this young Corrigan . . . if he means to hunt down your father, as he has sworn. If he makes any suspicious move, we can be ready to act."

She looked at him from wide brown eyes, but stayed silent.

"You were wise, my dear, to treat him in a friendly manner. But you must always be on your guard, particularly as to the whereabouts of your father, until we trace down the real culprits. I am working on it, Lorrie. My lawyer is busy, too.

"You're good," she whispered, but shivered. "So good."

"It may be you will have to take me into your confidence as to where your father is hiding, little Lorrie, if the worst happens."

"I wish I could," she began, "but—"

"But you promised your father you'd keep it a secret. . . . I understand, of course, Lorrie, why you've claimed you didn't know where he was. It was wiser, that way."

She didn't answer. Vaguely she realized that her very silence was an admission that she knew her father's hideout.

"I might be able to help your father, if you would take me fully into your confidence," he went on.

"I wish I could," she said. "But you're right—I promised. And I have never yet broken my word."

"Good girl! But you may need to break your word this time, Lorrie, to save your father's life. And if you do, count on me."

They had entered the brightly lighted dancehall now, and Lorrie caught a strange light that flickered for an instant in his queer eyes. Fear filled her. Despite his friendship, his kindness, she felt afraid, all at once, of Fancy Black. She was glad she would be away from the dancehall for a week, at least. Her heart sang at the prospect of being in the theatre again . . . with Thad.

LEP HARDY was much more imposing than the Blackjack's owner, Fancy Black. Lep was younger; a man perhaps in his late thirties. His tall broad figure moved with noiseless ease; his face was round and ruddy, and his eyes gleamed with tawny lights beneath his smooth auburn hair. Lep Hardy was like some sleek jungle animal, a golden, quick moving beast. He always wore brown broadcloth, and his vest of leopard skin was draped with a heavy golden chain.

He came to Lorrie now, as she went into the office to remove her wraps. "I wanted to go for you, myself," he grumbled, "because I was worried. You were late."

"I had a guest." Then, because she knew he would learn it, anyhow, she told him. "It was Thad Corrigan; he's here with the show."

Lep's tawny eyes shone with reddish lights. "The proddy loco! To dare hunt your pa right here in Sun-Dance! But don't you worry, honey. I'll take care of Thad Corrigan."

"I'm not worrying," she sighed. "And the show will move on in a week."

"Mebby this Corrigan, if he gets nosey, won't move with it."

"Please, don't make any more trouble, Lep," Lorrie cried, filled with sudden panic. "I couldn't stand any more."

"Poor little dear!" Lep caught her hands. "But don't you worry. I'm lookin' after you. I want to go on doin' that—lookin' after you. For you're in my blood, I reckon. Can't think of nothin' but you. I'm plumb loco about you, Lorrie girl."

She stared at Lep Hardy. She had been grateful to him, considered him a friend, but never as a man to love her, a man to marry.

"Please, Lep—it's no use," she whispered.

"You mean—you don't want me lovin' you?" he scowled.

"It isn't that. It's just—"

"Is it because I've done time?" he asked bluntly, his face dark. "You oughtn't to mind me bein' in the pen, after your pa—"

"Oh, not that!" she broke in. "I'm grateful to you, Lep, and I like you . . . but only as a friend."

"I see."

Lep didn't look at her. His face was grim as he fought for control; one corner of his mouth twitched, and the pupils of his eyes seemed to enlarge, darkening them. The veins on his forehead stood out. But at last he could speak.

"Well," he said, "I reckon if that's the way the cards are dealt, it's the way we'll play 'em. I'll be your friend, and mebby some day—"

He didn't finish, but his arms went over her shoulders, as he smiled down into her eyes. The pupils of his eyes were still distended, Lorrie saw, giving him the appearance of an angry animal, but still he smiled.

"Who knows?" he said smoothly. "But for now—we're friends. And here's somethin' to bind the bargain."

Lorrie stood quietly while his face bent

to hers, but there was nothing friendly about his kiss, nor his embrace. His lips were fierce, savage, and when she tried to break away, his arms held her in a cruel, hurting grasp.

"Stop it!" she cried angrily, turning her face away from his. "Stop it, I say!"

"I won't—I can't!" Lep panted. "I—"

"Let the lady go!" came the command—in Thad's deep tones. And in Thad's hand was a gun; not an actor's prop gun, but one whose butt was hand-polished, satin-smooth.

With a growl low in his throat, Lep Hardy fell back, but his eyes were filled with menace as he stared at Thad.

Thad turned to Lorrie, bowed politely. "I came to bring you your lines," he said, "and to tell you that we're having a special rehearsal tomorrow noon."

"Thank you," she said, and pushed past him, into the dancehall beyond.

IT was good, being back on the boards again, giving the familiar plays, hearing loud applause. Lorrie would have loved it, had it not been for the constant heartache she knew, whenever she saw Thad. Sometimes, when she was in scenes with him, when they talked together, a warm thrill would trickle through her heartache, and she'd forget for a moment that Thad was her enemy, that he was here to track her father down.

But only for a moment. Always something brought back the bitter memory with sudden force; usually it was the sight of tawny Lep Hardy, hovering somewhere in the background.

"I'm lookin' after you, Lorrie," Lep had said, just before the first performance. "I'm stayin' close, as much as I can. And if you need me between times, you can always reach me." His voice lowered. "There's a quick way from the stage to the Blackjack. That trapdoor, backstage, leads down to a sort of cellar. Behind the old cupboard down there is a door that leads into the Blackjack cellar, then up to my office. Fancy had it left in when he built the new Opery House, but he don't want folks to know."

"Thanks, Lep, I'll remember," Lorrie said. "I don't know why you're so good to me."

"Don't you, now?" he laughed, catching her hand. "Well, I'll be claimin' my reward some day."

She drew her hand away, uneasy at his persistence. Lep acted as if he were sure of winning her, sooner or later. Thus an added worry and fear came, whenever she saw him in the audience at the Opera House.

There was a big audience every night. The place was crowded with Sun-Dance people: cowmen from the valley and miners from the mountains; a few women, but largely lonely men, looking for excitement.

Every time Lorrie appeared on the stage, everyone clapped madly, but only silence greeted Thad. A growing menace seemed to be in the air—directed against Thad. It was an ugly, hostile thing, growing more intense with each performance. And although she had steeled her heart against the fair-haired actor, Lorrie knew a great fear for him.

Jenny shared it. "Lorrie, what is it?" she demanded. "Thad hasn't done anything. Yet people are so bitter against him! It isn't fair." For Jenny didn't know that Thad had asked Lorrie to betray their father, and she openly liked Thad. "They might hurt him."

"They can't," Lorrie cried quickly. "Anyhow, Thad will be leaving town soon. The company's just here a week. Then dad will be safe. . . ." But her eyes were haunted.

"I guess dad will never be safe," Jenny said slowly, "until he's had his trial and been found innocent. This hiding out—"

"Has Thad Corrigan been talking to

you?" Lorrie demanded. "Wanting you to tell him where dad is?"

"No." Jenny's yellow head went up, and there was anger in her blue eyes. "Thad wouldn't do that. If he were going to ask a thing like that, he'd go to you —not me."

"Of course," Lorrie said quickly, and drew the younger girl toward her. "Now don't worry, honey. Everything is going to be all right. We're probably just imagining that folks don't like Thad."

But it was not imagined, Lorrie realized, as the week neared its close. When she went to rehearsal that last afternoon, she heard Thad's name spoken in ugly tones, from one of the little knots of men that had gathered along the street.

Sun-Dance was full of men, she suddenly noted. Each of the nine saloons was doing a land-office business, this early in the day. And on the theatre bill, before the opera house, somebody had crudely drawn a rope around the neck of Thad's picture.

LORRIE stopped before it, staring with horror-filled eyes. There was something so sinister about the ugly threat—something so terribly vicious, like the whir of a rattlesnake, ready to strike.

"Looks pretty bad, don't it, Miss Lorrie?" a voice demanded.

She whirled, looked into the wizened old face of Tex Pike, the livery stable hostler. Tex was also the Sun-Dance sot; he was seldom sober, under any conditions, but was more intoxicated than usual today.

"Tex, what does it mean?" she demanded. "Tell me—at once!"

He looked at her from bleary eyes, then closed his lids in cunning evasion. "Ye'll find out, Miss Lorrie. Folks know what's goin' on. And they ain't apt to stand for it."

"Tex!" she said sternly. "What's going on?"

Tex shrugged, muttered something, and staggered toward the next saloon.

"That's right!" another man called. "Come on, Tex! They're settin' 'em up down at the Last Chance."

Lorrie frowned as she stared at them. Free drinks were bound to make trouble. Men drinking too much, talking too much! There was a weight of worry in her heart as she went around to the stage entrance and into the wings, where Thad and an older actress, Madge Holder—were waiting.

"Lorrie, what's the trouble?" Madge demanded. "People here are mad, and it looks like it's directed at Thad. I'm trying to get him to go to the sheriff."

"I think you should, Thad," Lorrie said, her troubled brown gaze going to his blue one. "I'm worried."

"You needn't be." He smiled down at her. "I carry guns in the play tonight, and this time they won't be empty. If there's any trouble, I can take care of myself. I wasn't raised in the Panhandle for nothing."

He took her hand, and Lorrie's pulses leaped to his touch. Her breath caught in her throat, and her heart beat a tumultuous rhythm. Then Madge spoke again, breaking the spell.

"And I don't like the looks of that red-headed beau of yours," Madge went on. "It gives me the creeps, the way Lep Hardy stands back and eyes Thad. I think he's jealous over the love scenes you and Thad do together."

Thad dropped Lorrie's hand and turned away. "Shall the three of us go over that last scene together?" he asked.

There was no more talk of the menace throughout the rehearsal, that lasted all the long afternoon, though a feeling of tension hung over the entire cast. Some of them were actually afraid of the evening's performance, Lorrie gathered, but they were all old troupers, and never considered abandoning the show.

And then, at the end of rehearsal, Jenny came.

"Where's Thad?" she demanded.

"On the men's side," Lorrie told her. "What is it, Jenny?" For the child was white-faced, and her eyes burned as if with unshed tears.

"I want to see Thad," Jenny panted. "Oh, there he is." She hurried over to him. "Thad, I've got to tell you—"

Thad drew the two girls to a little nook behind the wings, a place where the few others, still remaining in the theatre, would not notice them. It was near the trapdoor Lep Hardy had mentioned, Lorrie noted idly.

"What is it, honey?" Thad asked the little yellow-haired girl.

"Thad, I've found out why everyone's angry," Jenny choked. "They're saying you came here to get your brother's share of the stolen money. They say you know where dad is, and they're getting all worked up about it. Lep Hardy is setting up free drinks at both of Fancy Black's saloons—and there's talk of a tar-and-feather party after the show tonight!"

CHAPTER THREE

Traitor Heart!

THAD was silent a moment, while his wide, generous mouth drew to a tight line. He looked down at Jenny, a serious light in his eyes.

"Go to Old Doc's and stay, will you, honey? I don't want you in any excitement. You can help me most of all that way. Promise?"

"I'll do it, if you'll promise to take care of yourself," Jenny said vehemently. "We couldn't bear it, Lorrie and I, if anything happened to you, Thad."

He smiled, held Jenny's two hands. "I promise to take care of myself," he told her, "so don't worry." He bent, kissed the girl gently on the forehead, then pushed her toward the door. "See you after the show, when everything's quieted down. And thanks, honey, for coming."

When Jenny was gone, Lorrie turned to Thad. "What will you do, Thad?" she choked. "I can't bear it—if you're hurt."

She leaned closer to him, her hands fluttered toward him. All reason was gone. Only twisting pain was left, and fear. Fear—for Thad!

He caught her two slim hands, held them tightly, while his blue eyes looked deeply into her brown ones. "Why can't you, little Lorrie?" he asked, as if that were the most important thing in all the world. More important, even, than his own danger. "Why can't you bear it if I'm hurt?"

"Because I love you," she whispered. "I love you so much that it would kill me if anything happened to you."

"Lorrie, sweet!" Almost with a single motion, he drew her arms about his neck, then slipped his own down to pull her close, with fierce tenderness. His lips went with warm passion over her cheeks, her throat, and then—to her mouth.

Under the magic sweetness of that kiss, the walls of the empty theatre faded away. The garden scene on the garishly painted canvas behind them became real, filling the world with the sweetness of roses, the fragrance of violets. Even the setting sun, filtering through the dusty windows, became a misty, radiant glory all about them.

"Lorrie!" Thad murmured. "This is all I want—your love."

"You have it, Thad. My love . . . and my trust."

Still holding her close, Thad's hand stroked the dark hair back from her heart-shaped face. "Your trust, darlin'? You're ready to trust me?"

She drew a long breath. "Yes—I trust you. If you want to talk to my father, I'll take you to him."

"Lorrie!" Thad tipped up her face, looked deeply into it. "It's the only way.

If I can talk to him, we can straighten this out. And it will have to be soon, darlin'. After the show may be too late."

Lorrie shivered. "You can't stay for the show, Thad. You just can't! Jenny says—"

"It'll be all right, darlin'." And he kissed her tenderly. "What we've got to worry about now, is to reach your father in time."

"We'll go right now," Lorrie said huskily. "We'll have time. It's only four miles to the Widow, and about three miles up into the canyon where dad is hiding. I'll slip over and get our horses—Jenny's and mine—and meet you at the south end of the draw that runs behind the theatre here. Nobody'll see you go. But we must hurry."

Another quick kiss, then they went outside. Lorrie waited until Thad had melted through the twilight shadows, down into the draw. Then she hurried home, changed her clothes, and saddled the ponies, glad that Jenny was at Old Doc's, where she couldn't ask questions.

Circling the outskirts of town, she rode swiftly. . . . Fear rode with her—fear for the man she loved, and fear for her father. If she were a traitor. . . .

But she wasn't going to think of that. She had promised to trust Thad, and she did trust him. Trust him as she loved him—with all of her.

THE ride to the Widow was a sweet one, in spite of the tension that hung over them. They kept to the foothill trail, out of sight of the town, and once drew into a clump of mesquite as a group of riders passed on the main trail below. After that, nobody came along, and Lorrie forgot the danger a little.

The air was redolent with summer sage. The western sky was painted with the sunset, and all Chula Valley lay quiet and drowsy at their feet. Even Sun-Dance, seething as it was with turmoil, seemed but a peaceful cluster of buildings against the valley floor. It was as if sunset had spread a blanket of quiet happiness over the world, the way Thad's nearness spread a glorious joy over the pain that had filled Lorrie's heart.

"Isn't it lovely, Thad?" Lorrie's eyes were wide and starry.

He nodded. "I'd admire it, anyway, it being your real home, Lorrie. Jenny said your mother was a Sun-Dance girl."

"Yes," Lorrie replied and dimpled. "She was a Sun-Dance girl until dad came into town with a traveling troupe. Then she left it. And she never came back, because—well, because she eloped on the eve of her wedding to another man. . . . Sometimes—" she spoke slowly— "I wonder who that man was, and whether he still lives here. Mother never told us. I guess she thought she'd humiliated him enough without spreading his name."

"She must have been sweet and thoughtful," Thad said, and reached over to lay his hand on Lorrie's. "Like you, darlin'."

"She was far sweeter than I. Just ask dad."

"When I see him." Thad nodded, frowning at the sun just sinking over the horizon. "And I hope that's soon. We've got to push our horses, going back, for we can't miss this performance."

"I wish we could," Lorrie exclaimed, thinking of those angry men. "Thad, I wish you wouldn't go back."

But he only laughed and followed Lorrie as she turned her horse off the trail, into high-walled, barren, Wailing Creek Canyon. Shadows fell abruptly, then: cold shadows that brought back all of Lorrie's fear, Her heart beat in her ears —louder than the muffled plod of their horses' hoofs on the sand, echoing back and forth between the canyon walls.

Dion Arnold, Lorrie's father, had heard those echoes. When Lorrie rode up to the

little prospector's shack, built against the hillside so cleverly it fairly blended with it, there was no sign of life. Not until she called, did he appear.

"Dad!" Lorrie cried, and ran toward him, to throw her arms about his neck.

He held her close, patted her shoulder tenderly.

"We've been so worried, Jenny and I," she said, looking affectionately into his face.

She had always been proud of her father. At forty-three, he was still handsome enough to be a leading man. But now his eyes—blue, like Jenny's—looked from deep sockets in his lined face.

"Lorrie, there isn't much time," Thad cut in, coming forward. "I'm Thad Corrigan," he said to Dion Arnold. "Dave's brother. And I had to see you."

"Yes." The other nodded wearily. "I was told you were looking for me. And it's best for us to talk. We never took that money, Dave and I. And—"

He stopped, straightened up, and stared down the pass. Lorrie listened, too; heard the muffled pound of hoofs.

"Why, somebody's coming!" she gasped. "Is it anyone you know, Dad?"

"No. The Mexican who brings my supplies comes late at night. . . . It's the deputy!" he finished dully, as the group rode into view.

FOUR of them, there were. From their horses, Lorrie recognized them as the men who had passed on the lower trail, while they hid above.

"Got here ahead of you, Corrigan," Deputy Orb Pingree said, as he climbed down and strode toward Dion Arnold. "Then waited in the canyon till you'd passed. Thanks for the tip-off." And then, to the old actor: "Brung an extry hoss along for you, Arnold. Climb on, and we'll get started."

"Wait," Thad said. "You came here because—"

"Because I got your word to foller ye," the deputy said shortly. "Ain't no time to discuss that now. We got to get this prisoner safe in jail, before Sun-Dance finds it out, or there'll be hell a-poppin'."

Lorrie's face was white with anguish, as she ran over to her father, clung to him. "Dad!" she choked. "Oh, it's all my fault! I—I loved him, Dad!" The words were an anguished whisper. "I loved him—and trusted him!"

"Then it's not your fault!" he smiled. "If your mother hadn't trusted me blindly, without knowing whether I was worthy or not, I wouldn't have had the happiness I had with her."

After a tender kiss, he climbed to the saddle. "Don't worry, Lorrie," he said. "Just go on with the show, like a good trouper . . . and pray!"

"Lorrie!" Thad spoke from beside her. "Lorrie, you've got to understand!"

"Understand!" she cried wildly. "I do understand—that I've betrayed my father, killed him, perhaps . . . because I loved you too much! You thought you could save your own self tonight, by letting them find my father. But—oh, I hope your scheme doesn't work. I hope they go through with that tar-and-feather party. I—I'll feel better about dad, if they do."

She was shaking with sobs as she mounted and rode after the others. Her father and his captors . . . on the way to whatever terrible thing lay ahead for Dion Arnold.

Thad rode beside her, but now there was no sweetness in his nearness—only a throbbing awareness that was a cruel pain.

"We can't talk now, but I'll see you at the theatre tonight," Thad said, as he alighted from Jenny's horse. "You love me and, deep in your heart, you trust me. Tonight I'm going to make you listen to me—after the show."

After the show. The phrase brought

back Jenny's warning of the awful thing Sun-Dance was planning . . . after the show. And it brought back something more—the picture of that penciled rope, drawn around Thad's picture, before the Opera House.

LORRIE barely had time to get to the theatre in time to dress for the performance, and she was glad she had to hurry. It kept her from having to talk to the other women in the dressing room; kept her even from thinking too much. But when she stepped on the stage, that first time—she knew a terror that drove out all thoughts, except for Thad.

Grimness, hostility, were in every white-blob face that stared from beyond the flickering coal-oil footlights. Only men's faces were there, and Lorrie realized, with sickening dread, that they had made their womenfolks stay at home, out of danger.

What danger? The question whirled sickeningly through Lorrie's head as she went through her part. *What were they going to do to Thad?* They had talked about a tar-and-feather party. But that would have meant a daredevil recklessness that would have come out in words—instead of this ugly, hostile silence.

The play was a comedy. Desperately, the members of the small troupe acted, trying to break down that awful wall of ugly threat. Lorrie worked with the others, throwing every bit of her young beauty, her talent, into making those men forget. *Forget what?*

One thing was sure. If Thad had planned that the capture of Dion Arnold would turn their anger away from himself—his plans had gone awry. Whether or not Sun-Dance had found out that Lorrie's fugitive father was in jail, it had made no difference. They were sitting there, in rows and rows of seats, hating Thad with an awful gathering force.

"Thad, you've got to get out of here!" Madge Holder spoke up, at the end of the first act. "You don't go on for the first seven minutes, and one of the other men'll make up and play your part."

"And let them take their spleen out on the rest of you, for fooling 'em?" Thad grinned. "No, I'm sticking."

"Thad, you can't!" Lorrie cried. "Oh, I didn't mean what I said, back there. You've got to believe me, Thad. No matter what you did . . . you've got to get away!"

"I'm sticking, Lorrie," he told her gently. "I've got some talking to do—after the show."

Lorrie's part kept her on the stage through most of the second act, and she kept close to Thad, whenever he was on; she even broke all the rules of stage etiquette by keeping her slim young body before him, whenever she could. She had the feeling that any minute now, a bullet might come ripping out of that crowded hall—crashing into Thad.

But the second act ended, and Lorrie drew a quick breath of relief as the curtain descended. Then came another sound—a sound that made her stand motionless behind the curtain, listening. It was the sound of feet leaving the theatre.

Thad glanced at her. "Just the men going out for drinks," he said, reassuringly. "They always do."

"I know—but not like this!" For now it was different. Instead of the shouting, laughing crowd, pushing toward the entrance in a jovial stampede for the saloons, this was a heavy, determined marching, with no shouting, no laughter, at all.

CHAPTER FOUR

Love Scene's Tragic Ending

WHEN the curtain went up on the third act, only a small part of the men had returned. Grim and silent, they

sat there, evenly scattered, as if for some definite purpose.

Lorrie never knew, afterwards, how she got the words out. And her heart was numb with fear when she had to go off stage, and leave Thad on.

Lorrie didn't want to go to the dressing room, where she would have to talk, so she slipped to the back door.

She stopped, frozen, at sight of the two men outside. They had guns strapped at their thighs; they were waiting. She heard Thad's name muttered, in ugly tones. As she strained her desperate eyes through the darkness, she saw that each window had its watchers. They had thrown a cordon about the theatre, so that Thad might not escape.

She drew back noiselessly, closed the door, and stood there with clenched hands. Something had to be done quickly. She would have to reach the deputy. But if she were seen, somebody would stop her.

She couldn't go. But Lep Hardy could! Lep Hardy loved her; he would do what she asked. He wanted her enough for that, wanted her enough—to save Thad for her. She would ask him to get Thad safely away, and if he wanted her in marriage, as the price of Thad's safety, she would pay it.

The trapdoor! Lep Hardy had said she could reach his office through that. She had just five minutes before she went on again, but that would be time enough.

Already Lorrie was opening the trapdoor in the stage, was climbing down into the darkness. Enough light shone from above to guide her to the old cupboard, which pulled aside easily. Behind it was the door Lep had described.

It opened quietly, and there was another cellar lighted by a dimly burning oil lamp. In the far corner were the stairs, and the trapdoor above was open. Lorrie started climbing, then stopped at the sound of voices.

Somebody was with Lep. Fancy Black! His queer whispering tones were barely audible to her ears, but Lorrie crept as close as she could when she heard her own name.

"Lorrie is not for you!" Fancy's words came slowly, precisely. "I have chosen the girl for myself."

"You!" Lep Hardy burst forth. "Why, you're old enough to be her grandfather!"

"That is of no account. She is to be mine. She greatly resembles her mother, who was stolen from me."

Lorrie shrank back with a gasp. So Fancy Black was the man from whom her mother had run away!

"LORRIE'S mother and I were about to be wed," the strange tones went on, "when she eloped with Dion Arnold. I followed—tried to take her away—and Arnold's bullet cut this scar on my throat."

"So that's why you got it in for that actor feller!" Lep cried. "That's why you was so mad when he got away from that crazy mob."

"I'd worked it out through the years," Fancy Black said, with a peculiar tonelessness that still carried venom. "I'd seen to it that bad luck, as he termed it, chased Dion Arnold at every turn. I bided my time, until I had this robbery and murder charge against him."

"With my help," Lep put in.

"Then he escaped the mob," Black went on, unheeding the interruption. "But it mattered little, after all. I have his two daughters at my will, now, and the man is about to be hanged."

"So that's why you sent the sheriff after him," Lep rasped, "after I heard Lorrie tell Thad she'd take him there. It's why you wouldn't let me stop Thad Corrigan with a bullet. You wanted to get Arnold."

"Exactly." There was silence for a moment. Huddled in the darkness, Lorrie

knew a glow of happiness through her fear. Thad hadn't betrayed her! He hadn't sent the officers after her father. It had been Fancy Black, using Thad's name.

"Well, what now?" Lep asked.

"See that the mob breaks the jail and hangs Dion Arnold," came the slow, even answer, "along with Thad Corrigan. I wish Lorrie to have no other ties."

There was the hard thump of a fist upon the desk. "You shan't have Lorrie!" Lep's words roared out with vicious emphasis. "I'll wring your scrawny old neck first! I'm willin' to see that Dion Arnold is hung—and glad to make hell-sure that Thad Corrigan is strung high and certain! But I won't let you have Lorrie!"

"Why not?" Fancy Black asked, without a rising inflection. "If you attempt to get the girl, then you'll hang—on my evidence."

"Why, you double-crossin' old crow! You damned—"

"That will do." Lorrie could well imagine the smile that curved Fancy Black's thin lips. "After all, my friend, you committed murder when you shot Dave Corrigan with Dion Arnold's gun. And your word against mine would be laughed at, with your prison record. So—" The whispering tones became sharp. "Go and do as I say. And leave Lorrie alone."

Lorrie hurried down the ladder, across the cellar, and into the other one. Her thoughts were a whirling torture. She came up through the trapdoor, closed it, just as her cue called her to the stage.

It was a love scene with Thad, this time, and she was glad to fly into his arms. She was glad, too, to speak the lines of the play, to put every bit of her heart into them.

"I love you—love you with all my heart," she said.

Madge Holder and another member of the troupe took up the scene, then, and there was a brief moment, with Thad holding Lorrie close. She put her lips against his ear, spoke swiftly.

"Thad, I know you didn't send the officers to dad."

"I'm glad, dear. For I'm your father's friend. I know he didn't kill Dave, just as I know that neither he nor Dave robbed the Blackjack. We'll clear them both."

"Not now, Thad," she choked. "There's danger for you and dad." And she told him swiftly of what she had heard.

Thad's face was grim. "Get to the sheriff. Warn him. He'll look after your father. I'll draw the mob away from town, and make a run for it."

A woman screamed. It was Madge Holder. The action on the stage stopped suddenly. For the men in the audience had risen, were moving quietly toward the stage.

"WE'VE had enough of this!" one man roared.

"Come on down, Thad Corrigan," another man ordered. "Ye're the worst of the lot, comin' here to divvy the money with yer robber-brother's killer. We're decent folks in Sun-Dance—"

"We got the other actor feller," came another voice. "An' we mean business! The rest of you folks get off the stage, if ye don't want to get hurt. All we want is Thad Corrigan."

Madge and the others drew back, but Lorrie clung to Thad. "No!" she screamed. "No, you've no reason for hurting Thad. Nor my father. You've been tricked—filled with free drinks and worked to a frenzy. You've been told lies—lies! I know who robbed the dancehall and killed Dave Corrigan! I—"

"Lorrie!" It was Lep Hardy. His brown-clad figure had appeared in the box at the left of the stage. "Get away from Corrigan!"

"No!" she screamed again. "I'm going to tell what I know."

A big hand closed over her mouth; another caught at her shoulder and jerked

her away from Thad. At the same instant, a rope whistled through the air, settled over Thad before he could make a move. His gun fell to the floor as he was jerked across the footlights.

"Lorrie, keep still," Lep Hardy spoke at her ear. "I can't let the men know what I'm doin', but if you keep out of the way, honey, I'll do my best to save your pa and Corrigan. Promise?"

She stared at him from under long heavy lashes, then her veiled gaze went to Thad's sixgun, lying on the floor. Lep wouldn't help Thad, she knew. But he would kill Thad if she made a move.

Another plan was coming to life in her mind: the only chance to save Thad and her father.

"I promise, Lep," she lied staunchly.

Thad was struggling, bound as he was, but they were dragging him slowly up the aisle, toward the door. Lep Hardy sprang over the footlights, strode after the crowd, but Lorrie didn't wait to watch. She had already snatched up Thad's gun, was climbing down through the trapdoor.

She went through the cellars again, up the ladder, pushed up the other trapdoor silently. Fancy Black stood at the window, peering out. Every line of his long gaunt body showed gloating satisfaction.

ON soft feet, Lorrie moved across the room. "Put up your hands, Fancy Black!" she ordered.

"Lorrie!" he exclaimed. "Have you gone mad, child?"

He started to turn, but she pressed the gun harder against his ribs. "If you so much as move, I'll shoot. And now—" With her left hand she unbuckled his gunbelt, caught it before it fell.

"Lorrie, my dear, what does this mean?"

"It means," she said levelly, "that you're going up there and stop that lynching."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I'll kill you and tell them what I heard, here in this room, a few minutes ago. Lep Hardy will back me up. You know that. He hates you. So you'd better start. . . . And you can be sure that I'm right behind you, with the gun. If Thad or my father dies—you die, too."

A little silence, then he nodded, his agate eyes still expressionless. "It shall be as you say, my child."

The last of the men had poured out of the theatre, to join the crowd that packed the streets. From their clamor, Lorrie knew that both Thad and her father were in their midst.

"Hurry," she told Black, and prodded him with the gun.

"It will be impossible for us to get through this crowd," he protested.

"Go on," she said shortly. "You've got to."

Then, literally using the man as a battering ram, pushing with all her young strength, clubbing about with the gun, Lorrie made progress, inch by inch. But not fast enough! For her desperate eyes caught sight of the two men being lifted to a wagon. A long rope hung from a wooden sign, over Thad's head, and the dangling end had a noose tied in it. Lep Hardy, standing on the seat, was reaching for the noose. Another rope was being thrown over the sign, just above Dion Arnold.

Lorrie lifted her gun. It spoke once, cutting through the clamor.

"The girl did that!" a man shouted.

They turned toward Lorrie—saw Fancy Black, with upraised hand.

"Let me through to the wagon," he ordered. "I have something to tell you."

SO long had the men in Sun-Dance bowed to his orders, through the whiplash of money he held over them, that they parted now, wonderingly, let Fancy Black and Lorrie through to the wagon.

Lorrie—with the gun—was still standing beside Fancy Black when he began speaking.

"My friends, you are making a grave mistake," he said. "Neither of the men you have taken prisoner has committed any crime. You are mistaken—as I was, until tonight.

"Friends, neither Dave Corrigan nor Dion Arnold stole the money from the Blackjack. The real thief made the accusation, incited a mob, and blindly we all believed him. He stole Dion Arnold's gun from his hotel room, hid in the basement under the theatre, and shot Dave Corrigan, just after his actor friend had left him. He planned that the actor, Dion Arnold, would be hung for the theft and murder, and that his own crime would be covered, forever. But Arnold escaped the mob, and tonight his daughter and I found out that the real thief and murderer is—"

He paused, while they all waited on his next word. Lep Hardy was staring, his face pallid.

"The real thief and murderer," Fancy Black went on, "is—Lep Hardy!"

Hardy's oath cut through the silence. "Why, you dirty, double-crossin'—" Lep sputtered. "It was you who had me do it!" He leaped toward Fancy Black, but hands reached out, jerked him back, held him, writhing, powerless.

"I fear your prison record is against you, Lep," Fancy Black said mildly. "And, as you see," he told the crowd, now beginning to breathe, "Lep Hardy has admitted the crime."

Space was made for his captors to lead Lep Hardy through the mob. There was quiet, now, with no sign of disorder. Probably every man-jack of them was thinking the same thing: that Lep had killed at Fancy's orders. But none could prove it, and none dared move against the powerful man who owned most of Sun-Dance, and the mortgages on their ranches, as well.

Other hands had loosed Thad and Dion Arnold, and now Thad was free to take Lorrie in his arms for a blessed moment.

THEY were in the garden later, with all explanations behind them. The air was sweet with flowers. The world was a magic, beautiful thing.

"This will always be mine, Thad," Lorrie said. "We'll come back here each year, from our tours. And when we're older, and the theatre no longer wants us—"

"Then we'll just want each other, forever." He smiled, and took her in his arms.

When he kissed her, Lorrie knew that it didn't matter where they were. In some dusty, draughty, beloved theatre . . . or here. She and Thad would always live in a world of their own. A world created of love and trust.

THE END

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QUEENS ★ OF ★ RODEO

By Anita Allen

The first in a series of true-life articles on the colorful, dashing cowgirls of the Wild West arenas. . . . Introducing Lucille Henderson, lovely star of rodeo, who started breaking broncs when most girls are in grade school. . . .

I HAD seen Lucille Henderson in the arena, had watched her exhibit reckless skill, while the lights flared down on the tanbark. And I had caught my breath as she rolled from the saddle of a racing pony, slipped under his barrel and finished by standing in a dancer's pose, on his back.

A striking figure outlined against the background of the crowd; slim in a way the average woman doesn't know about—with a trained down compactness that would have made a ballet dancer weep with envy.

But—it hadn't been easy to see much of her face. She moved too fast for that, giving only the impression of feminine charm, and that unbelievable grace.

Waiting at her hotel to interview her, I did not expect beauty. She wouldn't be very young, certainly, because such skill requires years of training. Probably a bit outdoorsy and—

"How do you do?" said a voice that was pleasantly Western, and Lucille came into the sitting room of her suite.

For a moment, I didn't return her greeting. I was too busy looking at her and feeling amazed, envious and pleased.

This girl was not only impossibly graceful, she was beautiful and young. Young, with a delicate complexion, beautiful hair and—well, everything else. Hazel eyes and fine features, a neckline as definite as that of a sixteen-year-old.

Under my startled scrutiny, she grinned. A girl who could grin like that was a human being, even if she was much too pretty to make other women feel very comfortable.

"Sorry I'm late, honey," she drawled. But it wasn't exactly a drawl because "drawl" never describes real Western speech. There was a shortening of some syllables, a lengthening of others. "Wanted to get out of my riding clothes and rest while we talked."

"Why," expressing the first thought her appearance had brought, "haven't you gone into the movies?"

Her grin widened. "Well, there are an awful lot of pretty girls trying to do that and, besides, this is my life. I think it's the only thing I want to do. I don't think I'd be happy doing anything else."

She dropped into a chair—she was wearing a swank housecoat and tricky mules—and looked more than ever like something that had just sneaked out of Hollywood.

She talked easily and readily about her life, as casually friendly and direct as the range itself. Lucille comes from Montana. She was born there; grew up on a ranch; rode her first pony at the age of three and knew cowboy lingo by the time she was six.

"When I was ten, I decided life wasn't fair to girls," she said. "I was always given a carefully gentled pony and someone was forever hunting me down when I went out to have a look at the world. Boys could do as they pleased. But I had no freedom—or so I thought. Then my father took me to a rodeo—a local one which drew part of its performers from the neighboring ranches.

"I'll never forget that rodeo—the music playing and the crowd yelling when a rider conquered an 'outlaw' or bulldogged a steer. I decided it would be very pleasant to be a professional rider.

"AS WE were leaving, one of the gaily dressed performers stopped my father. It was Tom Delehanty, who had ridden for our ranch, years before. And that—"

Lucille's eyes took on a dreamy width. "That," she repeated softly, "was my first love. I'll never forget how he looked. He was one of the devil-may-care lads, with black hair which kept spilling down on his forehead, a wide grin and a crooked nose—the nose had been broken gentling an outlaw. And his walk—he moved like a panther. There is nothing in the world worshipful as a ten year old girl when she gives her heart."

"Did you meet him again?"

"Never. But—next May I ride in the roundup at Hayward, California, and his name is also on the list of entrants."

"Then—"

She laughed. "That was a long time ago. But after the rodeo, I dreamed of and lived only in the hope of becoming a professional rider. I would steal away from the ranch to practice stunts, I worked at roping and, finally, when I was unobserved, climbed onto a pony the boys had labeled outlaw. He crow-hopped a little and then broke into a meek gallop. When I got down I was crying like an infant because of my violent disappointment.

"But a week later, I managed a ride on another pony which most of the outfit refused to try. This one went into a sunfish and threw me right over the top of the corral. When I was picked up I had a broken collar-bone, and only the fact of my injury saved me a spanking. As soon as I was well, my father decreed that I should follow strictly feminine pursuits. I was no longer permitted to spend the entire day in the saddle. I fumed, cried and moped, until I was allowed to ride as much as ever.

"By the time I was sixteen, I could stand on a running pony, rope the toughest steer or subdue any of the 'outlaws' I encountered.

"And then I learned that a rodeo was coming to the nearby town. Not just a small show traveling over a limited circuit,

such as I had seen in childhood. This was a big affair—a glittering, famous one—that played most of the important cities in the United States.

"I memorized every name on the advertising placards which were spread through the district, and when the rodeo train arrived I was at the station. As the performers got off I was almost unable to breathe. Riders as glamorous—or almost—as my first love. Girls who seemed to have come from another world. Rolling-eyed wild ponies, Brahma steers and trick mounts.

"I trailed them to their hotel and sat in the little lobby with mouth and eyes open, forgetting everything except the wonders I was beholding—that is, until my father appeared and took me home.

"But I was back for the opening. More than that—I brought with me one of the fiercest outlaws any of our boys had ever brought in from the range. One of the rannies helped me get a bridle on him and then said the rest was up to me. The trip into town was fast because my mount was constantly trying to run away from the animal behind him!

"At the big tent which had been pitched for the rodeo, someone helped me hobble my outlaw, and then I hunted out the manager, Pa Jackson.

"He was a round-faced little man with a leathery skin, sharp eyes and a gentle manner. He explained that they never took on amateurs, especially girls, because it was too dangerous—they might get hurt. I had dreamed of riding my very own outlaw and his words seemed to bring the world to an end.

"Tears rolled down my cheeks and I turned away. But Pa Jackson, looking unhappy, stopped me by saying: 'Well, now, sister if you're sure you can handle yourself on that bronc—'

"And so, I was given a place on the day's program and announced as 'The Lovely Lucille—outlaw tamer.'

"ONE of the other girl riders loaned me a gaudy and attractive outfit. It consisted of tight fitting doeskin trousers, a broad, hard leather belt, a bright green silk shirt, a brown neckerchief—and a huge, cream-colored Stetson. I wore my own high-heeled, open-mouthed boots.

"I watched the first part of the program without seeing it. My mouth was dry and my heart thudded. Someone was calling me. It was time for me to go on. My outlaw was being readied in the chute. Maybe I shouldn't—

LUCILLE HENDERSON

"Then I remembered Tom Delehanty and it was almost as if I could hear him saying: 'Sure you can, kid. Go ahead and try.'

"Someone helped me up to the top of the chutes. I dropped into the saddle, the gates were swung back and the blindfold snatched from the horse's eyes. He sailed through the air. I thought minutes passed before he struck the ground, and then he hit like a thousand pounds of lead. He hit so hard that the jar numbed my spine. I held on and forgot the crowd. I could hear the roar of voices, but it meant nothing now. The outlaw was sailing through the air again. And again he came down with terrific force. When I clung, he stopped, gathered his feet and shot into the air, hitting with all legs stiff. He didn't get rid of me. I was still there—and wishing I wasn't. The crowd roared again. They were roaring for me—as a rider!

"The pony shot forward, heading straight for the wooden barrier below the stands. He hurtled like a bullet and twisted aside just a split second before he would have crashed into it. Without decreasing his pace, he raced along the edge of the fence, trying to rub me off. That failing, he began to sunfish, spinning until I was dizzy. But then, suddenly he stood still and began to tremble. I lifted the reins and he trotted obediently forward.

"A yell came from two hundred throats. 'That's ridin' 'em, cowgirl! Yip-p-p-ee!' A band began to play. I rode off, waving my hands at the cheering people.

"Pa Jackson was waiting for me. And, as he helped me down, he said: 'Think you'd like to go on with the show?'

"Did I think I'd like to? It was unbelievable! I was a rodeo rider. That is, I might be—if my father didn't catch up with me.

"But I managed that, too."

Next month:

LOVE LAYS SIEGE TO ROBBER'S ROOST

A novel of courageous sweethearts on the wild range beyond the law

By JACK BECHDOLT

Also a new Sun-Dance love novelette

CUPID STAKES A HOMESTEAD

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Plus a galaxy of western love stories, short and long, and features—by **Harry Lee** Fellinge, J. Lane Linklater, Anita Allen and others!

July issue will be published May 25th!

Lawmen's Sweethearts Die Hard

By Victoria Case

Then, for the first time, he realized where Nancy had led him.

Nancy Eborall helplessly watched her sheriff lover tricked into a horrible, flaming death. Never again would she taste the thrilling sweetness of his lips—unless he might be waiting for her, beyond the last suicidal turn on her tragic trail to vengeance!

SMOKE rolled down from the ridge and filled the clearing, heaving and tumbling as if stirred by a giant spoon. Flames were running wild behind that smoke. The clearing would be surrounded within the hour, and old Clay Eborall, with his weak heart, his daughter Nancy, and the strange, slinking man named Myron Hager, who visited them, would be cut off from the world.

Nancy Eborall, running the two cows through the smoke into the barnyard, put down a twinge of uneasiness. She must live through these hours without John Talmadge, when every hour away from him was an hour lost. She paused to adjust the wet handkerchief over her mouth, and the thought of John Talmadge caught up with her like a sweet, powerful weakness. John's arms could shut out the world. His kisses swept her beyond thought. When he gave orders, yesterday, that they abandon the cabin—orders that were official, as he was sheriff of the county—she was weak as water with the urge to obey him.

It was Cousin Myron Hager who refused to go. And old Eborall, too weak to walk the four miles down-trail to John's car, was strong enough to stay with the cabin he loved, and protect it from chance firebrands.

"We're safe enough," Nancy scolded herself, groping into the dimness of the haymow. "If it has to be this way, I'm glad Myron is here where I can watch him, and John is outside where he's safe."

There it was! She wanted safety for John, and he, as sheriff, young and unafraid, walked always on the edge of danger. Safety was not for sheriffs, nor for their wives. The sweetness of John's love must make up for that worry.

Suddenly she felt that someone was behind her in the haymow.

IT was Myron, moving noiselessly like a cat, his long face oddly hard. Too late she saw that he carried a length of rope. He was upon her, rolling her in the hay, whipping the rope about her arms and feet, while she strangled, face down. He jerked her over and plugged her mouth with her own handkerchief. She fought desperately, but her strength was no match for his.

Nancy lay bound and gagged, her eyes blazing. Myron disappeared as swiftly as he had come. Was the man insane? John Talmadge would kill him for daring to lay a finger on her. She paused a moment; gathering strength. Then she stiffened. Someone was at the cabin. Homer, the young hound, whined excitedly. Her father's voice was raised in surprise. She rolled painfully toward the wall, and managed to get one eye to a crack.

It was John! He stood at the cabin door, his smooth head bare, his brown face stern, a revolver ready in his hand. The sight of him blotted out everything to make room for the glory of her love. But the clutch of panic brought her back. John had promised not to come unless the posse came with him. And now the thing she feared—the clash between Myron, the fugitive, and John, the sheriff, was here. And she was trussed and helpless. Myron must have seen John coming up the trail, and decided to put Nancy out of the way for a few minutes. But why? She was not left long in doubt.

Myron came into view, running. Nancy heard his high voice, yelling. "She's gone up into the woods, after that young cow."

She saw John jerk toward him, aghast, and her father came running around the corner of the cabin.

"In front of a crown fire!" Eborall's voice rose. "She's bound to be caught." He thrust two fingers into his mouth, and his frantic whistle shrilled piercingly.

Nancy struggled to cry out or make a noise, but all she could manage was the feeble sound of her heels drumming on the pole floor.

"I'll get her!" John shouted. "Nancy!" He was off up the trail, toward the falls, shouting. The smoke eddied behind him, blocking him from sight.

Nancy sobbed suddenly, jerking her body toward the door. The fire was coming like a thousand horses gone mad. John wouldn't pause until he reached the little clearing, near the falls. And she was here, helpless! If she could reach the blade of

the scythe beside the door, she could free herself, if she didn't go mad, first.

It took an eternity, and started her wrists bleeding and her breath tearing at her lungs, but she freed herself. She flashed through the gate and down the path by the cabin, toward the trail.

ALREADY the roar of the fire rose above and swallowed out all other sounds. Live cinders and burning twigs fell in the clearing. She saw Homer, the hound, tugging at his chain. Her father, who should have been resting in his bunk, was beating at little spurts of flame in the grass, his face a dull red, every breath shaking his frail body. Myron sat idly by, with a pail of water, in case a burning brand should light on the roof. A frenzy rolled up into Nancy's throat, and choked her.

"Father, I'm going after John," she screamed, not pausing, and was past him before the words were finished. That scream was her mistake. He came after her with a swiftness she did not know he could command, and he dragged her down, just at the edge of the forest. His thin old hands held her in a grip of steel, while his body shook in great, heart-breaking gasps.

"Let me go," she panted, tearing at his fingers. "It's John in there, father. John! Do you hear!"

Eborall raised himself slowly, not loosing her. "I can't lose you, too. It's suicide!" he gasped. "Hotter than hell! Nothing can live!" He peered down into her face, fighting to control his breath.

Nancy's eyes strained toward the hot, eddying smoke, her mouth working. "Father, he's in there, dying. I want to die, too. I want to feel the flames that burn him Father, you've loved. You know what it means. Don't keep us apart. Let me die with him."

"No, no, Nancy! There's a chance—" he gasped. "He might have come out across the pasture—in the smoke—Nancy, girl. Wait. Promise you'll wait until we are sure!"

He offered her hope, but there was no hope. There was something else, though. The man who had sent John into this inferno still lived. She mastered herself with an effort that was almost beyond her strength. "I can't die yet, can I?" she whispered wonderingly. "There's something I must do first. Now let me help you up, father. I'll be all right now."

Her face was almost as gray as his own, her body bowed with weariness. They clung to each other, the slim girl, who moved as if she was dead, and the frail old man, whose gallant heart kept him near death, and still would not let him die.

They went slowly down the trail toward the cabin. Birds fluttered down through the smoke to huddle by the running water. Owls, hawks, songbirds and the rich glow of a Chinese pheasant, came before their eyes and disappeared again. The menace of the flames frightened them out of their age-old fear of human beings, encouraged them to come close.

It wasn't until they stumbled up the cabin steps and Eborall saw Myron lounging there, watching them, that he remembered. He clung to the porch post. "Myron said you were up in the woods!" he said to her.

Nancy could scarcely force herself to speak. "This is a trick of his, father, because John knew enough to come with his gun ready. We're shut up here with a killer."

Her flat tones added to the horror of her words. Eborall swung toward him, astounded.

Myron snorted in thin laughter. "It's time we got things straight around here. You knew the law was after me, didn't you? And John Talmadge, pretending to court Nancy, was edging around to take me?"

Eborall sank down on the steps, staring. "I had no notion of it. What have you done? What has he done, Nancy?"

SHE tore her handkerchief to shreds between her fingers. "Robbed a bank, killed the cashier, shot a federal officer. I think that's all."

"So you did know!" Myron's eyes gleamed redly, like the eyes of a caged beast. "You and your sweetie had the reward all divided up, I'll be bound."

Nancy rocked her slim body, her head on her hands. "All I knew was that J-John expected a telegram last night, authorizing your arrest. He'd already made up his posse and sworn them in. And today I suppose they are all fighting fires and couldn't come up with him."

She lifted her head and fixed blank, burned-out eyes on him. "But don't think you'll escape. You've got John out of the way, but the posse will be up as soon as the trail is open. You may have a day or two days, but you can't get out."

Myron's hand seemed to twitch, and a revolver gleamed suddenly in his hand. "You'll get me out of this damned trap, the two of you, or you'll never draw another breath."

"As if I cared!" Nancy whispered, hiding her face again.

Myron grinned, his thin lips drawn back over his teeth. "You'll find out there's ways to make you care. Now, old man, get to work. And don't go after your rifle, either. I've got all the guns and axes on the place stowed away. There ain't a thing you can do, but what I tell you. So, get busy!"

There was nothing else to do. The heat grew more intense and the smoke rolled down in smothering waves. They wrapped wet cloths about their faces and struggled to beat down the sudden flames that leaped up without a second's warning. Nancy took over the barn and house roofs, thankful for the abundant flow of water from where the two forks of the river joined. She doused the low roofs time and again, and chased the flames that sputtered and ran across the meadow. Myron did nothing, merely sat by the river and ordered them about.

Nancy was glad she had the stock inside the fences, for they would have run smack into danger. The clearing was surrounded by fire now. Only its hundred acres and the two forks of the river gave them a chance.

Nothing could live in the direct path of the flames. The three of them retreated to the water, bending low to breathe its coolness, close to the end of their strength.

John was dead, Nancy thought, numbly. He must have run, shouting, the two miles up the trail, until he came out at the falls. Not finding her, he would turn back, but the terrific heat and the acrid billowing smoke would down him.

He might stave off the end by submerging himself in the pool at the foot of the falls, but she knew only too well the dread history of such an attempt. The air, hotter than the breath of a furnace, could not be breathed into human lungs. He was dead from the searing heat, or drowned.

Even here, outside of the direct path of the fire, they knew the shortage of oxygen, and felt as if they were suffocating. Myron had finally been forced to lend a hand in the fire fighting, for Clay Eborall had collapsed, gasping, his outworn heart unable to drive his gallant body to further effort.

Now they were crouching in the water, while Nancy bathed her father's white face, and kept her own breath jerking through wet cloth. But her muscles refused their duty and she slid to her knees, moaning, not caring whether she lived or died.

WHEN she awoke she was in her bunk, a great weariness in her limbs, and a lightness in her head that shut out

thought. The cabin was gray with smoke that rasped acridly in her lungs, and her eyes were filled with smarting tears that did little to ease the ache in her heart.

She must have been there for several hours, when she heard her father coming, his cane rapping hard on the floor. He peered through the smoke, his eyes red-rimmed and bleary, his mouth unsteady.

"For better or worse, it's over," he said. "Can you get up, Nancy? We'll want a bit of supper."

She could get up. She could even look out across the clearing, where the smoke moved in long fingers, up to the woods that smouldered sullenly. The flames were out, and there was a feel of rain in the air. The first drops fell, as she watched, pattering on the cinder-strewn walk. Then they came like a flood, washing away smoke and fire. She turned back to the stove, her eyes flowing again.

Myron stayed out of sight until she rang the cowbell. Then he came, with his slinky walk, from the direction of the barn. His face wore a look of mingled bravado and dread. His eyes, too, were red-rimmed and bloodshot.

Nobody said a word. Her father ate his venison stew quietly, his eyes on his plate. Myron ate greedily, and drank noisily of his coffee. Nancy tried to taste a bit of bread, but it was unpleasantly harsh in her mouth, like sawdust. She silently cleared away the food and went back to her bunk.

The night was sodden with rain, and as long as eternity. Nancy tossed fitfully, sleeplessly, thinking. She must finish John's work for him, and remove Myron from society where he cheated and killed. But Myron had the guns, and his man's strength, which she had already felt. He had the right of might, and meant to use it. She had only guile, which is the last resort of weakness against strength.

Somewhere in the endless, dripping dark she found her answer. By morning she had her plan outlined, and she dressed, with restlessness gnawing at every nerve.

The morning light came slowly, as if not sure of its welcome. Nancy prepared breakfast, and summoned the men.

How does a woman feel when she has lost everything that makes life sweet, she wondered, watching Myron at his meal. She answered herself, with a twist of her mouth. She felt lost, without perspective. Life held no interest for her. All her hopes and dreams had been burned away as ruthlessly as had the forest. John was dead. That meant she was dead. Her brain and her heart were numb. Nothing mattered. She was devoid of all feeling.

Suddenly she knew that wasn't true. She shook with feeling, blazed with it, burned until she could almost believe that the flames must show through her skin. And it was all directed toward that mean-lipped, shifty-eyed man, who sat there sucking up his coffee with noisy gulps. How dare he set himself above the laws that guard human life? What colossal conceit let him break through the intangible rules that divide men from animals? Whence came his courage, that he could tear down the walls of custom, and let in the menacing flood upon his own head?

Now, she knew for the first time—knew it with her heart, not her head—why a sheriff must be elected, armed, and backed by posses and guns. The sheriff stands by the break in the walls, the walls behind which men and women lead decent, kindly lives, and children play fearlessly.

She'd tried to persuade John to give up his work. She had told him it looked ridiculous for a grown man to go about with a gun and pretend he was protecting people. But now she knew.

SHE lowered her lids lest Myron see the blaze of hate in her eyes. She'd carry the fight on for John. She would finish the work he had begun, and take one killer out of the world.

Her determination glowed like the coals

of an old fire. There was heat enough to burn out her timidity and reinforce her frail strength; to force her on, regardless of cost to herself. She saw, at last, too late, the stuff of which a sheriff's wife is made.

"You'll have to get away," she said to Myron. "You know that?"

"It's up to you," he answered, shortly.

She controlled her voice. "You can't go down-trail because they'll be there, knowing you're wanted; nor stay here, because they'll be up to get you. But I thought — Father, if Myron headed straight back over the ridge, he would come out over the pass and down the other side toward Hillton, and nobody would be expecting him."

"It's really eighty miles around by the road," she explained, growing calmer now that her work was beginning. "But over the pass it's only twenty miles at the most, and you'll come to some farms where you could buy a horse."

"What's this about eighty miles and twenty miles?" Myron demanded irritably. "Does anybody come that way? Is there a road?"

Eborall took up the story, at a look from Nancy. "Used to be a trail twenty years ago, but since the stage was opened, people would rather ride around than walk across. I've been over the hills myself, but not for years. Nobody has come that way recently, except Suttle's wife, last spring."

He sketched the incident of Suttle's wife. She had been visiting outside, and was returning home without notifying her family. She found herself in Hillton, short of money. To come by stage, she would have run down the eastern side of the mountains for fifty miles and angled over. Then she would be at Beaver, a crossroads store down below, eighteen miles from home, and it might be a week before anybody would come in or out. So she slung her suitcase over her shoulder, hiked from Hillton over the pass and dropped down the near side, walking in on her family at nightfall.

"And she was only a slip of a girl," Eborall concluded. "You'll find it no great chore."

"But somebody will follow," objected Myron, moving restlessly to stare up at the ridge.

"You can make it in a day," answered Nancy, remotely. "And nobody will be up this way until tomorrow, because they'll be waiting for John to come down and give them orders."

Myron's grin was cruel. "Good! You'll come to show me the way. These damned hills all look alike to me."

THIS was the demand she'd waited for. "I'll go part way with you," she promised. Then, lest he hear the eagerness in her voice, "I'll be glad enough to get you out."

"You'll come all the way," said Myron. "It'll encourage me to see you limping on ahead."

Eborall helped here. "Do you know the trail, Nancy?"

She let him see the torture in her eyes. "I'll follow the trail Bob Loftus took."

Eborall's face tightened imperceptibly. "You know the Bob Loftus trail?" he said, softly.

"I know every step of it," she answered, in a kind of cold passion, "and where it leads and where the end lies, and—and—father, with John gone, I think I'll just go —all the way—with Myron. *All the way!*"

"You'll need to, once you start," Eborall said, his voice weary. "I can't bear to have you go, Nancy, but I see how it is. I'd go in your place, but I can't make the climb."

Myron was looking from one to the other, suspiciously. "You're damn right you'll go all the way."

Eborall rose, unsteadily, clinging to the edge of the table. "Make up a packet of food, Nancy. Myron, best cut down your luggage as small as you can. You'll have some climbing to do."

NANCY donned hiking boots and trousers that slimmed down her already slim figure. She tied a band about her hair, wondering if the white face in the mirror had ever smiled. She thrust a sandwich in her pocket, knowing she would never use it.

Myron came, carrying a suitcase, incongruous in his tailored clothes and thin-soled shoes. Her father found a bit of rope for him, with which he could sling the suitcase across his shoulders if need be.

Nancy went out the kitchen door with Myron at her heels. "Goodbye, Dad," she said.

He put his arm about her shoulders without a word. His eyes were weary, his mouth sagging. His smile was worse than tears.

To hide her face, Nancy stooped to trail her fingers over the silky head of the hound, Homer. He leaped up, wagging his tail, begging with his eloquent eyes to be permitted to follow her along whatever trail she chose.

"Goodby, old fellow," Nancy said, and Homer, beset by some premonition, pointed his nose skyward and howled. Myron, cursing, jerked out his revolver and shot him through the head.

The sound of the shot echoed back from the ridge. Nancy stared with horror, as the silky body twitched and blood oozed from the fine forehead. Homer whined once, and was still.

Then Myron broke the silence, muttering, "We won't have him following us, anyway."

Nancy felt her body shaking with a rage that pounded so she could neither see nor hear. She turned away and went through the gate, across the pasture, blindly, numbly. Myron followed her.

Eborall leaned on the gate, shading his face with his hand. "Bob Loftus' trail," he whispered. "My poor baby!" He put his thin hand across his mouth to still its trembling. "I did my best, Janey. Now she's yours again."

* * *

Where yesterday the evergreens had drooped in cool beauty, and the low underbrush clothed the outline of the ridge, today held only a charred, pitiful blackness. Here and there a stubborn root smoked, and the smoke stung the eyes. But the night's downpour had laid the fire low. The smell of wet wood ashes was like the smell of death.

Nancy led the way into the burned woods, toward the south fork of the river. Myron followed clumsily, his city-bred feet awkward on the woods path. He shifted his suitcase from hand to hand, grumbling. She ignored him entirely, forcing her feet through the drifts of cinders, with a strange smile on her face, as if she went to meet a loved one. Now she wished she had eaten her breakfast, for she became conscious of her weakness. But what were weak muscles, if the will was strong?

They picked up the south fork of the river, an hour later, and Nancy explained briefly that they must follow this stream to the mountain lake above, skirt its edge and cross the pass. Then they would drop down the other side. Fishermen used this lake in season, but the woods had been closed to vacationists because of the fire hazards. It was extremely unlikely that they would meet anyone. But Myron only grunted and shifted his suitcase.

She saw, with a cold joy, that he was growing weary. His thin shoes were unfit for the trail and his slack muscles could not be driven to the steady climb. And as he grew tired, he grew more sullen and walked with his eyes on the ground. That suited her perfectly.

A low ridge lay on each side of the river. Yesterday it had been a mass of green, but today it was charred black, with remnants of underbrush and the dead smell of a wet burn. Here and there, a fir

tree was untouched by fire, but burned yellow by heat.

Somehow the scene gave Nancy strength. It was the strength of desperation, but it helped her sore muscles and straining lungs. She was weak from hours of anguish. Every step, now, was will power rather than strength.

THE ridge gave way to rocky cliffs that gradually approached the river, until the two hikers made their way along at the foot of the cliff. Myron scowled up at the grim wall. "Is this the way that Loftus fellow came?"

"Step for step," answered Nancy, setting her teeth. Her ordeal was close at hand, but her strength was ebbing fast. Her head felt light. She could scarcely force herself along the rough path. The salal and huckleberry stubs snatched at her ankles, and her feet stumbled close to the murky flow of the river. She watched the water anxiously. If the flow had altered in the canyon ahead, her plan would fail. But the river, too, approved of her plan. It would do its part. The water churned through the narrow gorge, promising every help.

She forced herself on. The rock wall narrowed the ledge, until their path was scarcely a yard in width. It rose above the river, gradually, heading for the top of the walk. Presently they could look down to a wall below, as well as above. Ahead, the two walls seemed to come together.

"It's getting pretty narrow," Myron complained, stopping to shake some pebbles out of his low shoes. The strain of the rapid pace was telling on him. He looked gray and ugly. She wondered fleetingly if he had ever walked more than a mile in his life.

"We must go ahead this way, or turn back for more than a mile before we can climb the ridge," she answered, almost breathless. Her throat was suddenly dry. "You don't mind a little climb, do you?"

He dragged the suitcase to his back, with the rope across his chest. "The shortest way is the only one I'll take. You sure we can go ahead?"

"This is the trail Bob Loftus took," she answered, and Myron was satisfied. He followed close on her heels, as if he feared to be separated from her by as much as a yard. He kept his eyes turned away from the flow of the river.

They were thirty feet or more above the water now, angling upward across the slope of the cliff. The wall above them rose another twenty feet. Myron, occupied with the effort of keeping his footing, said nothing, but followed where Nancy led, and she went on and on.

The path narrowed until it was only a few inches wide. They had to cling to the uneven rocks to steady themselves. Her whole mind was on her task. She hadn't an ounce of strength to spare. She could willingly have stretched out on the trail to die. But still she pushed on. The water below echoed in her ears like voices, cheering her forward. They were close to the bend in the wall. She had almost reached her goal.

"John," she whispered, through dry lips. "John, I'm coming, and bringing—him!"

Myron awoke suddenly to the position he was in. "I'm not going any further," he shouted.

She turned back a white face from the jutting rock to which she clung. This was the test. One more step, and she'd have him.

"I can see around the corner," she shouted back. "Come on! It's only a few feet more. Put your foot there, and reach for this crack in the rock. You'll make it fine."

Cursing, he stretched to his full height, and pulled up to the next step. Nancy was around the rock now. He found a precarious hold with the toe of one shoe, and his fingers gripped the edge of a crack.

He moved cautiously around the edge of the rock. Then, for the first time, he realized where Nancy had led him.

SHE clung, miraculously, to the face of the cliff. A sheer drop below her ended in the churning water. Above her, the rock wall was perfectly smooth, without the suspicion of a hand hold. Beyond, there was not a vestige of a trail.

Myron's yell strangled in his throat. He moved to retrace his steps. But he had come too far. He could not see below or behind him, to find the slender hold he had just quitted. His fingers dared not release their grip.

He turned a livid face to her, his lips strained over his teeth. "So this is the Bob Loftus trail?"

She laughed aloud, and there was something in that laugh that made the hair prickle on his scalp. "Yes, he came this way," she shouted, her face shining with a strange glow. "You see, it looks like a trail until you're so far along you can't get back. They found his body a mile down river." She gathered her breath again, to reach his ears above the noise of the water. "Every bone was broken."

He strangled. "You brought me here to kill me?"

"Why, yes, Myron," she agreed, and her eyes seemed too big for her white face. "You see, you killed John."

He almost fell off the rock. "I'll kill you, too," he choked.

Her smile answered him, wearily. "I'm caught, too, Myron. That is the price I'm paying for your death. I'll watch you fall, and then I'll come. I'm taking you to John."

* * *

Clay Eborall watched a procession of little black ants that climbed up one post of the porch, crossed a corner and went down the step. His pipe was dead and his chin rested on his breast. His face had gone slack, sagging, as if the strings that had held it firm had been loosened. He pressed one hand hard on his heart to ease the pain.

Nancy must be well up the canyon by this time. He thought of her white face and staring eyes, as she set out, followed by that skunk of a Myron. How could he be a second-cousin? There must be evil blood somewhere. He should have split that sleek skull open with the chopping axe, or clubbed him while he slept, or—God, what can a man do when old age has taken the force from his blows and the resolution from his mind. He can only endure, and bury the dead—as he had buried poor Homer—and sit idle to wait for his own burying.

A shout from the woods brought him up as if he had been shot. A man ran down the trail from the falls—a blackened, tattered man, with his face smudged with smoke and char, and his clothes creased in a thousand wrinkles. It couldn't be John. Eborall shaded his eyes, staring. John couldn't have survived the fire. Nothing lived that could pass through that fire. Still, there wasn't another human in the woods.

It was John. He came running as if he couldn't wait another moment to put his question. "Where is Nancy? Was she caught? I hunted for her as long as I could stand it."

Eborall was close to being speechless. The events of the day had almost broken his frail hold on life. "She was here all the time," he mumbled. "Myron Hager tricked you into the woods. Then he took my gun. Why weren't you burned?"

John laughed, his white teeth gleaming against the black of his face. "I should have been. You know that pool at the foot of the falls. I got into that, and slipped on the rocks, and by golly I came up behind the water fall. There's a little hollow there, just big enough for a man if he doesn't mind being doubled up and cramped and wet through. And the flow

of the falls protected me from the fire. It was the only way in the world I could have escaped. A miracle, really. I recommend that cave for you if you want to be thoroughly uncomfortable. Where did you say Nancy is?"

His blue eyes were dancing. His elation at missing what had looked like certain death gave him a gaiety that sat strangely on his unshaven, smudged jaw.

Eborall tried to force his trembling lips to speak. "You see, she was sure you were dead and that it was Myron's fault. Then he took my rifle, like I told you, and there wasn't even an axe—" He shook as if with the ague.

"Where is she?" John demanded.

"She set herself to do away with him," Eborall had the feeling that Nancy's motives must be perfectly clear to John. "And there wasn't any way she could do it, being only a girl, and—"

"Where is she?"

AT LAST Eborall told him, and made it clear, and John, looking about him wildly, understood that she had gone two hours before and was far up the trail once trod by the ill-starred Bob Loftus. Two hours! John snatched a rope, and ran swiftly across the clearing.

He knew the canyon. Many a time he had whipped the swift stream for trout, and many warnings he had listened to about the false trail up the cliff. He remembered how he had once said he could make his way up, and Nancy had gone up the other way with a rope to wait for him. They had had to use the rope, too, or he'd have dropped off into the death that waited below. That was the day he learned that Nancy loved him. And now she clung to the cliff because of that love.

It seemed that every twig snatched at him, and every log lay across his path to hold him back. He was in good condition, and had been a cross-country runner in his college days. He knew his heart and lungs and legs could stand the strain, but he seemed tied down to earth. It was like a nightmare where one tries to run and can barely move. He dared not picture Nancy on the cliff. He let his mind go blank and simply flung his body forward with all his might.

He turned aside before he reached the river, for he must come at her from above the cliff. And somehow he missed the route, in the blackened woods, and swung too far to the left, so he lost the river, and had to crash back through the blackened woods, half insane over the delay. It was slower going than ever, and he leaped logs, tumbled into holes and fell over rocks until his clothing was ripped to shreds and his lungs were cut with pain. And still he ran.

At last he toiled up the last stretch that would bring him up above the turn in the rock wall. He gave himself a moment's breathing space, and then he sent forth a ringing shout. Maybe Nancy could hear him as she clung, and would hold fast for another moment. On the other hand, perhaps the sight of his smudged scarlet face and blood smeared torso would scare her out of what strength she had left.

He won the top, spent, and flung himself down in a kind of frenzy to peer over the edge. The bank shelved outward slightly, and all he could see was the churning, murky water below, and something white caught on the edge of the rocks. He shouted. There was no answer but the roar of the water.

He looped his rope about a tree-trunk with trembling hands and dropped over the edge, praying that he chose the right spot. Hand over hand, the rope between his feet for a brake, he let himself down. His muscles screamed, for he had used them hard, but they obeyed his will.

At last he could see below. Myron was gone. Nancy clung to the cliff, her white face turned up, her eyes wide, a smile trembling on her bloodless lips. She must

think he had come back from the dead. He saw her arms drop away and her body sway outward. He dropped like a plummet and caught her as her body left the wall.

The jerk of her body almost loosed his hold on the rope, for he had to spare one arm for Nancy, and the other hand was weak with fatigue. But his feet gripped below, and he swung, while the world turned about him, and the water seemed to reach up in welcome. He thought he must drop, after all, past the end of the rope and onto the rocks that would slide him into the water. The wall above him seemed a thousand feet high.

But he managed to get a toehold on the wall that eased the strain. Then, painfully, he wound the rope about Nancy's limp body, and knotted it tight with one hand, praying that it would hold. He climbed up, hand over hand, to the edge, and had to wait for several moments until he could make the last few feet over the rim. The rope was tight against the rocks and left little hold for his fingers.

Finally he won his way over, and lay gasping. Then, he pulled Nancy up onto the safe, solid ground above. Suddenly he collapsed beside her, utterly thankful and utterly spent.

SHE stirred presently, and opened her eyes. The pupils were immense, making her eyes seem almost black in her white face.

"John," she whispered, trying to lift her hand to his face.

"It's all right, Nancy. We're safe and alive."

She struggled to sit up, and pushed the hair back from her face with both hands. "John, it was terrible watching Myron. He didn't want to die."

"Don't talk about it, Nancy."

"Yes, I must, John, and then I can put it out of my mind. He cursed me horribly and when he felt his strength going, he went all to pieces like a little boy whimpering in the dark. He called his mother and—and—" she drew a long, shuddering breath, pressing her fingers against her eyeballs.

"Then he turned the most horrible look at me, and tried to reach me, to drag me down. His fingers just scraped my boots, and he went, screaming—It was hideous, John. I don't know why I didn't let go and follow him. I'll hear him scream in my dreams."

"He was a killer, Nancy," John told her, pulling her gently to the shelter of his arms. "He was born without any pity in him. People like that can't be allowed among human beings. You did the right thing. Now listen to my story. It's almost as frightening."

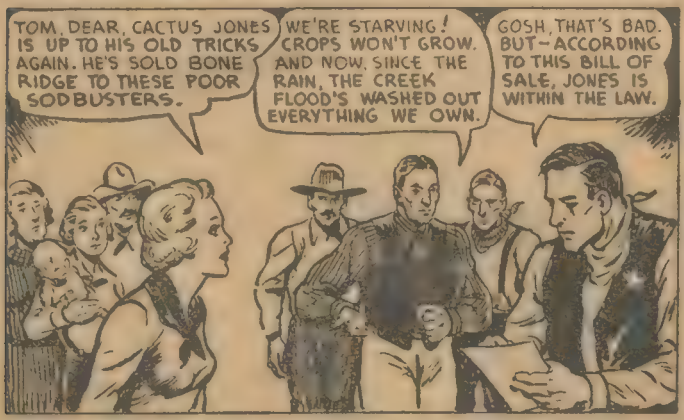
As he told of his night behind the waterfall, her face smoothed out, and her eyes lost some of their stricken look. Finally she could smile again and think of food. She pulled out the sandwich and laughed at his astonishment.

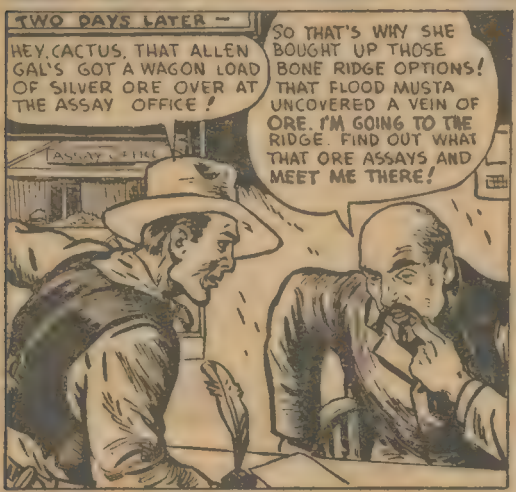
She took his smudged cheeks between her two hands, tenderly. "I think I'll be a good wife," she said. "You'll never find anybody else to love you when you look like this. Fire, smoke, smudges," she touched the traces with a soft finger. "Whiskers an inch long, red eyes, your lips chapped, and practically no shirt left. And I love every inch of you. Now will you kiss me first, or eat first? Do one or the other, quickly."

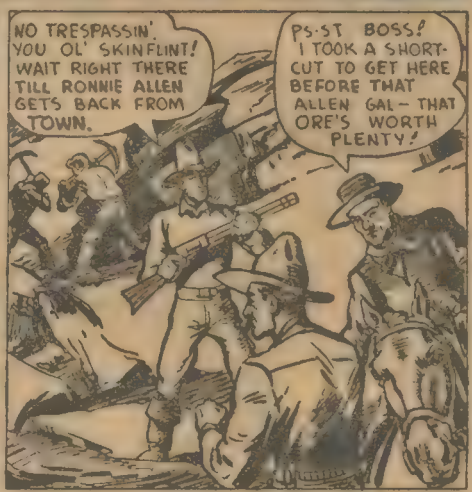
There was only one answer to that. The answer stirred her blood to sweet frenzy and woke her heart into singing, joyous life. Her pulses hammered, and the feel of John's lips on her own was ecstasy.

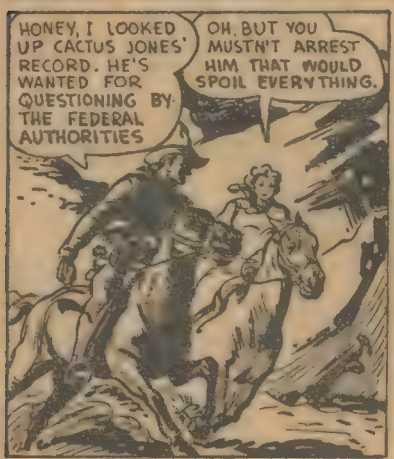
Overhead the sun broke through the clouds and around them, the dead forest stirred, promising new grass and a new living green that would conquer the desolation. Life was good again, and would continue to be good, as always.

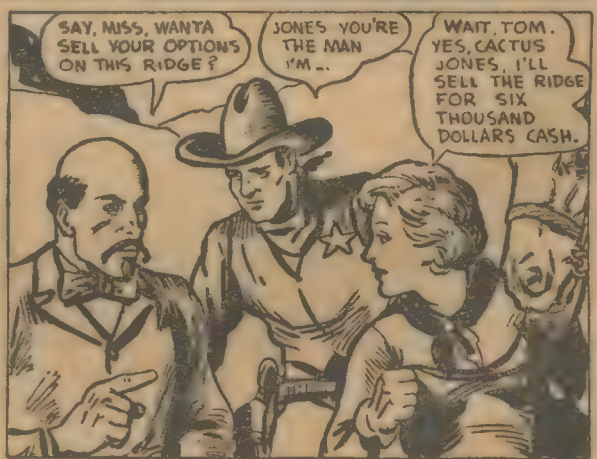
RONNIE ALLEN— FRONTIER HEROINE


TOM, DEAR, CACTUS JONES IS UP TO HIS OLD TRICKS AGAIN. HE'S SOLD BONE RIDGE TO THESE POOR SODBUSTERS.
WE'RE STARVING! CROPS WON'T GROW. AND NOW, SINCE THE RAIN, THE CREEK FLOOD'S WASHED OUT EVERYTHING WE OWN.
GOSH, THAT'S BAD. BUT—ACCORDING TO THIS BILL OF SALE, JONES IS WITHIN THE LAW.


TWO DAYS LATER —
HEY, CACTUS, THAT ALLEN GAL'S GOT A WAGON LOAD OF SILVER ORE OVER AT THE ASSAY OFFICE!
SO THAT'S WHY SHE BOUGHT UP THOSE BONE RIDGE OPTIONS! THAT FLOOD MUSTA UNCOVERED A VEIN OF ORE. I'M GOING TO THE RIDGE. FIND OUT WHAT THAT ORE ASSAYS AND MEET ME THERE!


NO TRESPASSIN', YOU OL' SKINFLINT! WAIT RIGHT THERE TILL RONNIE ALLEN GETS BACK FROM TOWN.
PS-ST BOSS! I TOOK A SHORT-CUT TO GET HERE BEFORE THAT ALLEN GAL—THAT ORE'S WORTH PLENTY!

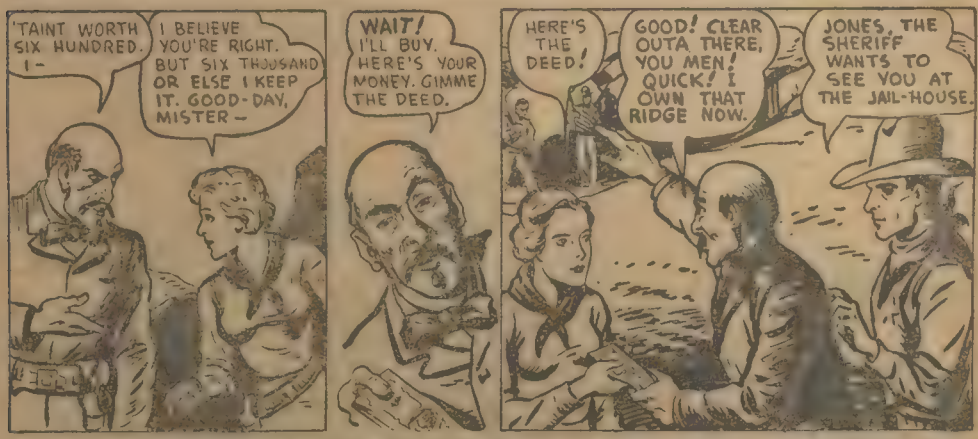

HONEY, I LOOKED UP CACTUS JONES' RECORD. HE'S WANTED FOR QUESTIONING BY THE FEDERAL AUTHORITIES
OH, BUT YOU MUSTN'T ARREST HIM THAT WOULD SPOIL EVERYTHING.

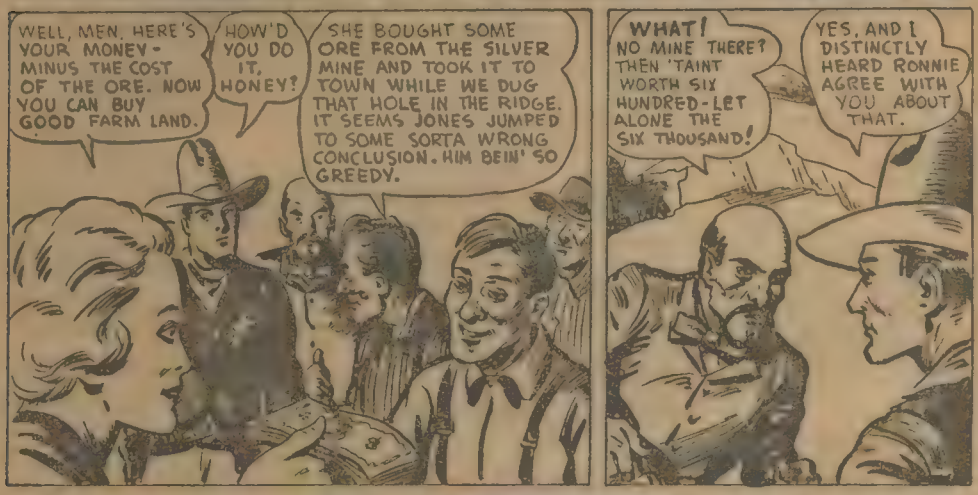

SAY, MISS, WANTA SELL YOUR OPTIONS ON THIS RIDGE?
JONES YOU'RE THE MAN I'M—
WAIT, TOM. YES, CACTUS JONES, I'LL SELL THE RIDGE FOR SIX THOUSAND DOLLARS CASH.

Love Breeds Straight Shooters

A tabloid story of Western Love

By JON BLUMMER


'TAINT WORTH SIX HUNDRED. I—
I BELIEVE YOU'RE RIGHT. BUT SIX THOUSAND OR ELSE I KEEP IT. GOOD-DAY, MISTER—
WAIT! I'LL BUY. HERE'S YOUR MONEY. GIMME THE DEED.
HERE'S THE DEED!
GOOD! CLEAR OUTA THERE, YOU MEN! QUICK! I OWN THAT RIDGE NOW.
JONES, THE SHERIFF WANTS TO SEE YOU AT THE JAIL-HOUSE.


WELL, MEN, HERE'S YOUR MONEY - MINUS THE COST OF THE ORE. NOW YOU CAN BUY GOOD FARM LAND.
HOW'D YOU DO IT, HONEY?
SHE BOUGHT SOME ORE FROM THE SILVER MINE AND TOOK IT TO TOWN WHILE WE DUG THAT HOLE IN THE RIDGE. IT SEEMS JONES JUMPED TO SOME SORTA WRONG CONCLUSION. HIM BEIN' SO GREEDY.
WHAT! NO MINE THERE? THEN 'TAINT WORTH SIX HUNDRED-LET ALONE THE SIX THOUSAND!
YES, AND I DISTINCTLY HEARD RONNIE AGREE WITH YOU ABOUT THAT.

Cowboy's

A gripping novelette of Western lovers — condemned to exile because their hearts proved too true

"If either o' these white-bellied sheep-lice lets out a yip—" she waved a gun airily—"I'll fill him with lead."

CHAPTER ONE

Wanted Man's Kisses

RITA HAD on four white starched petticoats already; one plain, two embroidered, and a fourth whose ruffles were edged with hand-crocheted thread lace. But the fifth one, descending slowly over her carefully curled coppery hair, was a thing so beautiful that Rita held her breath in awe. Ruffle after ruffle reached from hem to knee, and each cold-starched ruffle was edged in real store lace, brought all the way from Cheyenne.

"You must have ruined your eyes, mak-

Almost-Bride

By Ruby LaVerte Thomson

Paradise was so near—only minutes away—for the copper-haired ranch girl, Rita, who waited for the stirring notes of the wedding march. . . . Then her cowboy sweetheart crossed guns with her adorable brother—and tallied a blood debt that she alone could square, in bleak and lonely misery!

ing it!" Rita exclaimed, and threw her arms about the gray-haired woman who was helping her dress. Mrs. Lafferty had been the Arrowhead housekeeper for years, and was like kin to the orphaned Rita and her brother. "It's too lovely to be covered by a gown!"

"Sure, an' take shame to yerself," Mrs. Lafferty scolded. "A bride talkin' of goin' out, all undressed, like a brazen dance-hall girl! A bride, the most beautiful bride—" Mrs. Lafferty dissolved into the tears that seemed always ready to come. "And Dave Benton," she sniffed, "him so lucky—"

Rita laughed, dabbed at Mrs. Lafferty's cheeks with a handkerchief. "Just as long

as Dave thinks he's lucky," she said, "and keeps on thinking it."

"He will that," Mrs. Lafferty prophesied gloomily, "though small comfort 'twill be givin' Wallace Hale. I'm thinkin' that the banker's face will be as long as my arm when he hears ye pronounced the wife of another." She ended with a doleful shake of her head, as she turned to pick up the misty white tarlaton from the bed.

"Oh, Wallace is just my brother's friend," Rita smiled. "So don't weep over him, darling. After all, you were afraid he was coming to court me there for a while, and you wept about it. Do you remember, Laffy?"

"Sure, an' the lot of womenfolk in tears," Mrs. Lafferty sighed. "Tears an' heartache an'—"

Rita's laughter broke into her mournful speech. Then Rita's laughter stopped, suddenly. Her brown eyes, wide with fear, met Mrs. Lafferty's alarmed blue ones. They both stood motionless.

Cutting through their talk and through the chatter of the wedding guests in the other room, had come a sound—the most fearful sound that can come after nightfall. The sharp spatter of gunfire, close by.

"That was from the springs," Rita jerked out, through white lips. "Bud went there a half hour ago!"

Mrs. Lafferty spoke firmly. "Ye needn't worry yer pretty head about that rapscallion of a Bud. The lad is filled with spirits this night about his sister's weddin' celebration. He's maybe emptyin' his gun at a tomato can he happened to see. Sure, an' I'll wring his neck for him, once I lay hands on him again. Scarin' you like this! Turn around here now, pet. Let me have a chance to button this up the back the same as I buttoned it for your ma, rest her soul, the night she wed."

Rita obeyed, but her lovely face was troubled. She heard the sound of horses' hoofs in the yard. She knew that some of the men were riding to investigate the shots, and she was remembering the strain on her brother's face when he had said: "I've got to ride down to the springs, Sis, but I'll be back for the weddin'."

Bud hadn't been himself, lately. Rita had tried to believe he was sick, but deep in her heart she knew it was something else. Bud had been drinking too much, and making frequent trips to town. Rita knew that he went in to gamble. He must have been unlucky, for each time he came home a little whiter, a little more desperate looking. And he was neglecting the ranch.

The veil was fitted on Rita's coppery hair now, falling down to frame her lovely heart-shaped face.

"There, lamb, be takin' a look at yerself," Mrs. Lafferty advised, tearfully. "Just think what yer Dave will be sayin' when he sees ye."

RITA looked in the mirror and smiled; not at herself—a lovely vision in the misty white tarlaton wedding gown that her mother had worn—but at thought of Dave. Dave would be with her, from now on. He would share her worries, be a brother to Bud.

"Now let's be sure ever'thin's ready," Mrs. Lafferty said. "Somethin' old, somethin' new, somethin' borried, somethin' blue. An' a bit of gold in the toe of yer shoe," she quoted.

"All here!" Rita nodded. "My mother's dress is old, and my slippers new. I've borrowed your handkerchief, and I'm wearing blue garters."

"But the wee bit o' gold?" Mrs. Lafferty asked anxiously.

"Even that, Laffy. Wallace Hale gave me a tiny gold nugget."

"Well, then, ye're ready, dearie. The weddin' guests should all be here by now. And here's Dave, hisself!" She peered from the window into the early darkness.

"The spalpeen!" she exclaimed. "Him a-ridin' up the lane like the devil hisself was tailin' him. Dust flyin' all over his new black broadcloth. Wait till I get my hands on that—"

"Listen, Laffy," Rita said, breathlessly. "I want to see Dave for a minute, right now! Please!"

Suddenly she wanted Dave near, wanted to have his arms about her, holding her tight. She wanted to hear his voice, sweet and caressing. She knew that it would drive away the strange fear that had quivered within her ever since she heard the sound of gunfire. "Go get him, please, Laffy."

"But sure, an' it's bad luck for the groom to be settin' eye on the bride afore the weddin'," Mrs. Lafferty protested.

Rita shook her head. "Bad luck just couldn't come between Dave and me," she insisted. "It couldn't!"

"Bad luck's no chooser." Laffy's thin lips quivered. "An' I'll not be courtin' it for ye, pet! But—" she stopped, listened. "Good glory! Dave's comin' here. If that ain't his step an' knock, I'll be willin' to eat me own hat!"

It was Dave. He stood back for Mrs. Lafferty to pass, then he came in, closed the door, leaned against it, as if weary.

He was looking at Rita. But in the instant before tenderness had time to flame into his blue eyes, and love to soften his face, she got a glimpse of strain, of some deep worry there. But she forgot that, as she slipped into his arms.

"My darling, my sweet!" he murmured. "My little bride! In only—" He stopped, his voice strangely choked, and Rita buried her head against his shoulder in sweet shame, as she finished his thought. In only another few hours they would be together again like this . . . in this very room that had been her mother's bridal chamber, and where Rita, herself, had been born.

Rita clung to him in an agony of tenderness at the thought; she raised her lips hungrily for his kisses. Under the spell of them, her fear left her.

"Dave, how I love you!" she breathed, lifting a hand to smooth his shining dark hair.

"As I love you!" he said fervently. Then, in vehement tones: "Honey, you trust me, don't you? Trust me fully?"

She laughed a little, her old self again. "I'm marrying you, sir, or have you forgotten?" she demanded gaily. "Doesn't that prove that I trust you?" She lifted her bright head, lovely under the shimmering white veil. Then the laughter died on her lips. "Dave—what is it?"

He didn't answer for a moment. In the big parlor, the wedding music started—two violins, a guitar and an accordion—in sweet seductive rhythm. Rita trembled as she looked up at Dave, at the bleak misery that had suddenly etched itself on his lean face.

His arms had loosed their hold now, as if to let her go. His blue eyes looked straight down into hers.

"I reckon I should have told you, Rita, when I first came in. But I had to hold you in my arms for a minute, and kiss you—once more."

"Dave!" Terror darkened her eyes. "Tell me, quickly. What do you mean?"

"I mean—that maybe you wouldn't be wantin' my kisses, darling, if you knew that I had . . . just . . . shot Bud!"

CHAPTER TWO

Lost Heaven

FOR a long moment, Rita stared up at Dave, at the misery in his blue eyes, at his hard-held mouth. Then she forced words up through her tight throat.

"You—you shot Bud? My brother?" She closed her eyes against the dizziness that held her. She would have fallen, had it not been for Dave's arms. "Dave, it isn't so! I didn't hear you say it! You didn't!"

"Yes, darling. I shot Bud—down by

the springs. He isn't dead, but—well, they're bringin' him home, right now."

"But why?" She put both hands on his shoulders, stared up at him from a face whiter than the wedding gown. "Why did you do it, Dave?"

His eyes went away from hers, then, and he shook his head. "I guess I'll leave that for Bud to tell," he said at last.

In the next terrible silence, the beat of Rita's heart sounded to her own ears like the *drip-drip* of blood; her brother's blood, falling from Dave Benton's hands.

The music had ceased, abruptly, and Rita realized that the silence from the bedroom had spread over the whole house. For the space of three breaths there wasn't a sound. Then into the hollow emptiness came the shuffle of feet—the peculiar shuffle of men carrying a heavy burden.

Rita looked into Dave's eyes one instant longer before she jerked away. She ran to the door and threw it open. The men were just going into her brother's bedroom across the hall. She followed, saw Bud where they had laid him on the bed, his shoulder stained a damp, deep red.

"Bud!" she cried out, desperately. Heedless of the whiteness of veil and dress, she threw herself to her knees beside him, and gathered his auburn head into her arms. "Bud, tell me!" she implored, as as he opened his eyes and looked into hers. "Who shot you?"

She waited in quivering agony for his answer, for no matter what else Bud had ever done, he had never lied to her. Dave might have gone loco—dreamed he had shot her brother, but Bud would know, would tell her the truth.

"Who did it, Bud?" she asked again. "Tell me it wasn't Dave!"

A moment's tense silence, then Bud mumbled, "Yes. . . . I'm sorry, Rita. But it was."

"But why?" she cried out. "Why?" and broke into sobs.

Bud's face twisted to a grimace of pain. He turned away from her. "I heard cattle movin'," he said slowly, "and went down to see. I found rustlers runnin' a bunch o' Bar-C cattle across our place, near the spring. I tried to stop 'em. Then I saw Dave." He paused, went on after a moment. "We—we had words!"

"You mean,"—she could hardly frame her thoughts—"you mean that Dave, *my* Dave, was with the rustlers?"

A sob seemed to lodge in Bud's throat. "Not rightly with 'em," he said. "Seemed like he met 'em there—an' was tellin' 'em what to do. Dave was givin' the orders!'

Rita sat very still, trying to bring some reality back to life. Dimly she heard Mrs. Lafferty's voice.

"If some of ye'll be gettin' Rita away from this bed," the old woman said crisply, "I'll be after fixin' this boy's wound! An' me all dressed for a weddin' an' havin' to risk spottin' me best black silk with blood! I ought to be takin' the flat of me hand to ye!" she scolded Bud, as she deftly began cutting off his bloodstained shirt. Suddenly she glowered at Rita, her plump face puckered to unaccustomed sternness. "Begone from here!" she ordered. "Didn't I know 'twas bad cess for the groom to see ye aforehands?"

Firm hands drew Rita away, and she made no protest. From a distance, she heard the kindly tones of Wallace Hale, the valley's young banker, her brother's friend.

"Come on, Rita," he said gently. "Bud mustn't talk any more."

"But I've got to know more!"

"Then come to the kitchen. We caught one of Dave's gang. He's hurt a little, but can still talk."

IN THE kitchen, Rita saw the man, sitting in a straight-backed chair, his bandaged head propped on his hands. Three ranchmen stood guard over the prisoner, grim-faced, their guns looking

oddly out-of-place with their best store clothes.

Wallace stepped up to the rustler. "Miss Craig wants to ask you some questions," he said. "You'll answer them?"

"Reckon so," the man mumbled, and lifted his head.

Rita gave a gasp, for she knew him! It was Len Swarky, one of Dave's outfit. His wizened little face was almost pasty.

"Tell her what happened," Wallace ordered. "Everything."

Len shrugged. "Well, we thought we could run some o' the Bar-C cattle tonight, under cover o' the weddin'. But Bud surprised us there at the springs, when we stopped to check up with Dave."

"Dave?" she echoed faintly.

"Sure! He's the boss."

"He's—he's done this before? Rustled, I mean?"

Len scowled. "Hell, yes! I'm in for it, and he may's well be, too. We've bled the country white. But not you, Miss," he added, more kindly. "Dave wouldn't let us touch you."

"I see," she whispered, and swayed a little. She clenched her hands. "And the shooting, tonight?"

"That was a mistake," Len admitted, "on Dave's part. Bud was mad, but Dave oughtn't to've tried to kill him. I got nicked, and started to high-tail it with the others. I knowed the gun-firin' would start hell a-poppin'! But my hoss stumbled, and this banker-gent run me down!" He glowered at Wallace. "You won't get none of the others. They're in the Black Hills by now, and the devil hisself can't run 'em down!"

Wallace Hale nodded. "That explains a lot of things. The sheriff and the rest of us always thought the rustlers were already hiding out in the Black Hills. And here they've been living among us—with Dave Benton their leader!"

Rita stood still for a moment, looking about. The kitchen was a strange place to her, though she had known it all her life. The clock ticking on the shelf . . . the bracket lamp, with its tin reflector . . . the wood stove, with coffee in the great pot already simmering for the wedding supper. . . .

Wallace Hale caught her hand. "I'm sorry, Rita," he said.

"Have you sent for the sheriff?" she asked.

"Not yet."

"Then do it, now!" She flung her bright head high, went past him, through the door into the big dining room. Then she went on through the double doors into the crowded, noisy parlor.

Silence fell instantly when Rita appeared there. Every pair of eyes fixed upon her tragic white face.

"There'll be no wedding," she said steadily, "now or at any time. I've sent for the sheriff—to arrest Dave Benton! The rest you'll hear at the trial. And now"—her voice broke a little—"please go! I can't bear any more!"

"She's right!" Wallace spoke from beside her. "Take the womenfolks home. But if enough of you'll stay to keep the two rustlers under guard, we'll be grateful."

"They're under guard!" came a gruff voice. "Len in the kitchen, and Dave here!"

The crowd parted a little, and Rita saw Dave, then; saw him bound, wrists and ankles, in the midst of a group of men. Dave's eyes met hers.

For an instant, tender flames lighted them. Rita wanted to run over to him, tell him of the love that still burned in her heart, tell him of the agony that was tearing at her. Instead, fighting back the tears, she turned to Wallace. "I'll go back to Bud now," she said. "And—thanks!"

Wallace shook his head. "I'm looking after Bud," he said. "You go to your room, and rest." Out in the hall, he stopped, looked down into her face. "I want to look after you, too, Rita—if you'll let me!"

You have always meant a lot to me."

"Thanks!" she said huskily, and hurried away to her room. Once there, she jerked at the veil, at the misty white tarlaton gown. Once they were off, she stuffed the white bundle on the highest shelf of the big walnut wardrobe.

She was through with her wedding, through with marriage. Most of all, she was through with this hurting thing called love.

CHAPTER THREE

Traitor's Heart

MRS. LAFFERTY brought her the news.

"Bud'll not be dyin' this time, pet, God forbid!" she said, "though 'tis a nasty gouge he got across his side. Soon Doc Beasley'll be here, though why that young banker-upstart sent for the doc, with me able to take care of anything from a felon to a new baby, I'll never know!"

"Wallace sent for the doctor?" Rita asked dully, for want of something better to say. If only she could tear her thoughts away from Dave, could forget the feel of his arms about her, in this very room, a short half hour ago!

"He did that," Mrs. Lafferty nodded. "Sure, an' he said for the sheriff to be fetchin' the doc. A bad move it was, for likely it'll make the lawman get here too late!"

"Too late? What do you mean, Laffy?"

"I mean that men are fool-critters, at best. They're ready to spare that weasel, Len Swarky, on account o' his blabbin' what they want to know, and they're hell-a-tootin' to string up Dave, 'fore the law gets here!"

Rita whirled, ran to the window, stared out into the darkness.

"Put out the lamp!" she said tensely, then threw up the sash, stared at the ominous group of men gathered by the corral.

"We're damned fools to wait!" one voice carried to her.

"Let the sheriff trail the rest of 'em into Black Hills. We'll take care o' the leader!"

Rita leaned out, hearing more drifts of their grim talk.

"We'll make it a lesson to rustlers," said another. "It's a hell of a scurvy trick, winnin' a gal's affections, then shootin' her brother down!"

"Come on! Here's Bill Prouty with the rope!"

"For the love of God!" Mrs. Lafferty ejaculated. "The buzzards are comin'." Then, sharply. "What ye doin', young lady? Get them guns off, afore I smack ye good!"

Rita went on buckling her father's six-guns about her slender hips. "They can't have him," she said. "I'll keep him safe!"

But Mrs. Lafferty had bundled herself out of the door and down the hall to Bud's room.

Rita hurried to the parlor, saw the front door opening, the mob pouring in. Someone shouted:

"We want a little talk with you—outside, Dave!"

Dave's blue eyes were steady. "You afraid to talk here?" he asked.

"Our talk's private—and it'll be short!" Bill Prouty's squat figure crowded into the room. A coiled rope in hand, he came toward Dave. Others followed—a grim, fearful group.

Rita pushed forward, her hands close to her guns. "This is my home," she said. "You're leaving here now, peacefully!"

"An' by the blessed saints, I'm standin' here before her to back her in same!" Mrs. Lafferty shrilled. She barged in, holding Bud's twin sixguns.

The men stared in sullen silence. Some of them shifted their feet, moved toward the door. But Bill Prouty stood his ground.

"This man's a sidewinder!" he rasped. "He's wronged ye, Miss Rita, and he's got to pay! He's wronged all of us!"

"Let the law decide that," she said.

"The law!" Bill spat mightily. "This is the West. It's an eye for an eye! We need nothin' from the law!"

There was a chorus of assent. "Right you are, Bill!" . . . "String him up!" . . . "Take the womenfolks away, first!"

"Shet yer traps, ye dir-rty spalpeens!" Mrs. Lafferty would have started for them, but Rita held her back.

"Wait!" she whispered. "Wait!"

SHE WAS staring at the pool of red beside Dave's chair, and remembering how weary and drawn he had been when he came to tell her he had shot Bud. And she recalled now that there had been several gun-reports. . . .

"Dave's been shot," she said. "He needs care!"

Someone laughed. "We'll give him care!"

"Been bleedin' from the first," one of the guards put in. "I reckon his leg was shot up pretty bad in that fracas with the rustlers."

"You—you wouldn't hang a wounded man?" Rita cried.

"It's the best way," someone answered her. "The condition he's in, he won't rightly know what stops his breath."

Rita shivered, staring at the reddening sticky pool. As from a great distance, she heard an Irish voice: "Why, ye low-down scum! Ye stinkin' sons of sheep-herders! I'll—"

Again Rita whispered, "Wait!" The plan that came to her now was a desperate one, but there apparently was no other way. "Perhaps you're right," she said clearly. "Perhaps you know what's best!"

There was a concerted gasp, then Bill Prouty grinned. "Knowed ye had sense, Miss Rita. Now if ye'd like to ride up to my place till it's all over, reckon it'd be easier on ye. Mis' Lafferty can keep ye company!"

"What ye mean, ye nit-wit?" Mrs. Lafferty screamed. "Lettin' 'em bamboozle ye, like this? Why I'd gun-whip the whole cowardly lot!"

"No!" Rita flung back her flaming head. "It's justice! Only you've got to give us time to get away, Bill." She spoke breathlessly.

"Sure, we will! I'll give my word! Doin's like this ain't for womenfolks. We'll fetch ye yer hosses, an' wait till ye're plumb away! Twenty minutes . . . what say, boys?"

"Then bring the horses to the back door—and be quiet!" Rita said. "I don't want Bud to know. Nor Wallace Hale. He's with Bud!"

"Reckon the banker wouldn't relish it, at that. Ye're smart, gal!"

The men slipped out of the house toward the corral. Only the two guards were left with Dave. Rita bolted the door, then whirled, both guns trained upon the unsuspecting guards.

"Put up your hands," she said low-voiced. "Laffy, take their guns!" Then, when that was done. "Now, take the rope from Dave and tie them up—then bandage Dave's wound! Be quick, Laffy."

"You'll pay for this!" one of the guards snarled.

"Shet up, or ye'll be payin' with the back o' me hand!" Laffy whispered sibilantly, her fingers moving in swift deftness.

In only a minute the guards were tied, and she was washing the long deep wound in Dave's leg, bandaging it.

" 'Tis a shame to slash the leg of yer weddin' pants," she worried, "though no worse than tearin' up me best apron for bandages! Bad cess it is, when a man looks upon his bride in her weddin' finery afore the vows are made!"

It was all over quickly, and not even

the guards in the kitchen, nor Wallace Hale in Bud's room, had guessed what was happening. Mrs. Lafferty was pouring hot coffee down the revived Dave, when someone rapped on the front door.

"Hosses ready, Miss Rita!" Bill Prouty husked, low.

Then Bill had turned away and Rita whirled to the big woman. "Laffy—are you afraid to stay here alone? I'm taking Dave to the sheriff."

"Afraid, is it?" The light of battle gleamed in her sharp blue eyes as she picked up Bud's guns again. "Sure, an' I've been sp'ilin' for a fight, this many a day! An' if either o' these white-bellied sheep-lice lets out a yip—" she waved a gun airily toward one of the guards —"I'll fill him with lead."

"Please, lady," came a low moan, "don't wave that gun so easy-like! It might go off!"

"Then button yer lip," Laffy snapped.

Rita helped Dave to his feet. She knew the old familiar surge of ecstasy at his touch. Somehow, quietly, they made their way down the hall.

Rita knew that every step was agony to Dave, but they did not stop till they reached the back door. There Rita reached up to a hook, took down a great shawl and wrapped it around Dave. She threw a corner of it over his head.

Then, as she opened the door, she breathed a little prayer: "Please, God, don't let anybody be near. Make it easy. . . ."

IT WAS easy. Only the two saddled horses stood there, tied to the post. Bill Prouty had joined the men at the corral; he had kept his word. But the minutes were passing, swiftly.

Afterward, Rita never quite knew how she managed to get the shawl-swathed, wounded Dave into the saddle, nor how the two were able to ride out of the yard, without being stopped. Perhaps it was because the move was a bold one. Perhaps the blood-lusting men were too intent on getting out of the way as quickly as possible what they thought were only two women. At any rate, Rita was always grateful that at the proper minute the moon slipped under a dark, heavy cloud.

Bill Prouty called out to her: "Thanks, Rita! We're givin' ye twenty minutes!"

"All right, Bill!" she answered. Then they were out in the road, going swiftly in the direction of Bill Prouty's home.

Rita's heart was thumping loudly as she kneed her horse up beside Dave's. He threw back the shawl, and the moon came out from under the cloud again, so that she saw the smile on his face when he drew to a stop, looked at her.

"Rita, darlin'!" he said. "How can I say it?"

"Say what, Dave?"

"That you're the bravest girl in all the world, the truest! That I love you—love you!"

She leaned toward him, there in the saddle, lifted her lips to the flaming sweetness of his own. All bitterness, all pain, was swept away in that wild moment.

"You do trust me!" he cried. "You believe in me!"

Nor till then did she remember. She drew away, flung back her bright head, and tears stung her eyes.

"Dave, I'm so torn inside, I'm trying not even to think! You haven't denied anything—"

"Anything I say will bring you hurt, Rita. I shot Bud, but you've got to believe that I didn't know who it was till afterwards!"

"Bud says you talked to him first," she said gravely. "Bud has never lied to me, Dave."

"Then you believe him?"

She could have cried out at the hurt in his voice. She bent her coppery head to hide the tears that were bound to come.

"Dave—Dave! Can't you see? I've

got to, if I think at all. Len Swarky says the same thing, and Len's your man! But I'm not letting myself think, Dave! I'm just *feeling!* And now—we must go on, meet the sheriff!"

"I'm not bein' buried in any jail-house," he gritted, "with no chance to do what I've got to do! I'm hidin' out in that old hidden cave above the springs. The one we found two years ago. Nobody knows it's there but you and me!"

"Oh, I'm glad—glad!" she cried. "I couldn't bear to think of you being arrested, Dave. Let's go on now, hurry!"

"I'm travelin' the rest of the way alone," he said. "I'll keep the horse in the cave. But I hate to think of you facing those men back there, when they find out the truth!"

"They won't hurt a girl," she said. "You know that, Dave!"

Again his lips claimed hers, fierce, sweet, bringing again those dizzying outlaw desires. Then he was gone, on down the road.

Rita sat still and watched him, saw him swerve into the trail that led down to the springs. It would be deserted now. A few hours ago, there had been a battle there, over rustled cattle. But that was all over; the men had gone, and the Bar-C outfit had driven the cattle back to their own confines. Rita had heard the men talking about it. Again her lips moved in prayer.

Rita's eyes were desperate as she turned her horse about and started back toward home. The twenty minutes were more than up, she knew, when she reached the place, turned now into a mad-house.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Sound of Tears

RITA wasn't afraid when she stepped inside the door. She didn't mind the anger in the men's faces. They looked like savage beasts, ready to tear her apart.

Mrs. Lafferty sat in a rocking chair, swaying to and fro.

"They're frothin' a bit, dearie," she said, "over me riskin' me reputation, stayin' alone in the house with these good-lookin' guards! Nothin' like a Western man for honorin' women-folks!"

Rita faced them, her head high. "Even the sheriff will say I did right," she said, "to prevent a lynching!"

"How do you know he'll go to the sheriff?" Bill Prouty demanded. "How do you know he won't high-tail it to the Black Hills with his buddies?"

"I had to risk that," she said. "So will you!"

"Come on, fellers!" someone shouted. "Let's chase him down!"

Then they were tumbling out the door, to their horses. The next minute, the sound of pounding hoofs filled Rita's ears. Not till then did she notice Wallace Hale. He came up to her, looked down at her in his kindly way.

"If you'd come to me, dear," he said, "I'd have helped you."

Rita laughed, shakily. "It all happened so quickly," she said, "there wasn't time. How's Bud?"

"Resting," he said, "but I'll be glad when the doctor comes."

"Doctor!" Mrs. Lafferty sniffed, and got to her feet. "I'll fix the b'y some tea to prepare him for the ordeal ahead o' him!"

Then Rita was alone with Wallace. When he slipped his arm about her, gently, she leaned her coppery head against his shoulder. She was tired—so tired. But when he bent as if he would kiss her, she drew away. Her lips belonged to Dave.

"Please," she said, huskily.

"Dear, you must listen," he said. "I know you're all heartbroken over tonight, but you can't have any love left for a man like Dave Benton—a rustler, a would-be killer. And, Rita, dear, I love

you. I'm asking you to be my wife!"

She shook her head. "Oh—no!" she said quickly. "I'll never marry anyone."

Wallace laughed, took her in his arms again. "You're the kind of a girl who marries," he said, "and why not me? It's the one way to stop folks' tongues. They wouldn't dare talk about my wife. I'll ask you again in a few days, for I'm not giving you up, Rita. I'd teach you to love me, darling. After all, if you and Bud lose the Arrowhead—"

She stared up at him. "Lose the Arrowhead? Why—why, what do you mean?"

"Didn't Bud tell you about the notes against the ranch?"

"But the beef-cattle will pay them," she said. "Of course!"

Wallace smiled patiently, benignly. "There happen to be too many notes against the cattle for that," he said. His arms tightened. "But don't worry, sweet. Just leave it to me, for I love you!" Then he bent his head and kissed her, hard, until her lips felt bruised.

"That's good-night, darling," he said, and pushed her toward the door. "Now you go to bed and rest!"

"But someone's coming!" Hoofbeats sounded in the yard.

Wallace glanced out the window. "It's the sheriff and the doctor—and they're alone. Dave must have missed them," he added dryly. "Go on, dearest! I'll take care of the sheriff. Even if Dave did escape, the law'll have only praise for what you tried to do!"

THAT bruised feeling stayed with Rita all through her lonely ride to Dave that night. Her heart felt bruised, too. Just before she left, she had slipped into Bud's room and found the doctor gone. Wallace had ridden back with the sheriff to raise another posse to hunt down Dave.

Rita had stood there, looking down on Bud's pale, drawn face. It was worry-lined, even in his sleep.

"'Tis lucky the b'y's alive," Laffy wept, the tears running in furrows down her round cheeks. "Doc was sayin' had the bullet gone an inch nearer, 'twould have pierced his heart. God save him!"

That thought stayed with Rita, as she rode along, laden with provisions. It was only luck that Bud still lived. Dave was, to all intents, her brother's killer. Yet she was carrying him food, bandages. She was all torn with hurt for him.

It was a hard meeting. This time she wouldn't let Dave take her into his arms, though his nearness, the touch of him under her hands when she was bandaging the ugly wound again, brought a quivering to her whole body. Her heart pounded, dizzying her, draining her of strength. But her voice was steady when she said:

"I'm going to stand by you, Dave, help you, but we're enemies. You've got to know that."

She was unrolling the blankets she had brought when she told him that. She heard his quick, indrawn breath, but did not look up. She was spreading the blankets, just so, patting them out, in a caressing gesture, as if she were administering to Dave, as her heart longed to do.

It was a long moment before Dave answered: "It's as you say, honey. You've the right to make the rules. But I love you anyway!"

She looked up at him. In the dim light of the candle she had placed on the ledge, he was staring down at her, and in his face was tenderness and gentleness and a great hurt. She stood up.

"Goodbye, Dave," she said quickly, knowing she couldn't stay another minute without going to him, loving him. "I'll be back."

"You needn't," he said, "if you don't want to, Rita! And thank you, darling, for everything!"

Those next few days were a queer dim haze to Rita. Only in a vague way

was she aware of the life about her. She helped care for Bud, listened to Laffy's gossip, heard the hands talk of the search the sheriff was making for Dave, and was conscious of Wallace's words of love, all without any special feelings.

Late each night, she stole to the cave with food for Dave. She dressed his wound, her hands tingling to the touch of him, her whole body throbbing for his arms. But in some way she kept aloof, and refused to acknowledge the ever-present pain in her heart.

They were strangers, she and Dave. She was glad that he grew better. But on the day she noticed marked improvement, sharp fear filled her.

"What will you do now?" she asked him, and pressed her hand against her pulsing throat. "You'll—ride away?" She held her breath, waiting for his answer.

"Unless you want me to stay."

"No!" She spoke while she had the strength. "I want you to go—quickly!" And she hurried away, riding furiously toward home.

When she came to the cave the next night, Dave was gone. The place was empty, and the distant dripping of water sounded like tears. Then another sound was there . . . the muffled sound of Rita's weeping, echoing and re-echoing through the hollowed walls.

CHAPTER FIVE

Love Comes Riding

IT WAS a week later that Rita came out of the General Store in town. Her chin was set pridefully, her head high, but hot tears were just behind her long lashes, and turmoil seethed within her. Jake North, the storekeeper, had just refused to let the Arrowhead have any more credit.

"I'm sorry, Rita!" Jake followed her out on the sidewalk. "But Bud ain't paid me a cent in two years. All I got was promises, sayin' he'd pay when he sold his beef. Only he never done it."

"It's all right," Rita said, wanting to get away. "I'll see you later," and she started her horse.

"Well, if you can raise a mite of money—"

"What's the trouble?" a voice interrupted. It was Wallace Hale. Rita hadn't heard him come from the bank next door. "Needing money, Rita? You mustn't forget what banks are for."

"I—" she faltered, but Wallace turned to Jake.

"The Arrowhead credit is good with the bank, so let them have what they want, and I'll take care of the bill. Give him your list, Rita, and I'll bring the stuff out tonight. A mere matter of business," he smiled, as she hesitated.

Of course. That's what it was. A matter of business. Rita handed over the list, and was in the saddle, waiting, when Wallace came back.

"Rita, why will you risk such unpleasantness," he asked gently, "when I'm ready to save you from such things? You need a protector, dear."

Rita smiled bitterly at that. Her thoughts went back to the dark-haired man who had wanted the right to protect her, and who hadn't been worthy of her love. Always her thoughts were going back to Dave, with a yearning that was almost unbearable.

"I want to help you through the bad times just ahead, Rita!" Wallace clasped her hand. "I've done all I can to save your home. I've taken over some of the notes, personally. But I've got to have the real right to act for you—for my wife!"

"Oh, I can't! You've got to know—I can't marry anyone!"

He was silent a moment. "I'm still not taking your answer as final," he said. "I'll be out to the house tonight. In the meantime, I want you to be thinking of

what would happen to Bud, if he were to be turned from his home now. He's already bitter, a little too much given to gambling and drink. Well, anything might happen!"

"But it wouldn't be fair," she cried, "when I don't love you!"

"I'll take care of that," he smiled. "I'll make you love me, after we're married."

She drew a long shuddering breath, then gathered up the reins. "And we'll lose the Arrowhead, then—this week?"

He nodded. "You've been too dazed to talk about it, and I was doing all I could. But we'll go over that, tonight."

He held her hand for a long moment before he let her go, but Rita was scarcely conscious of it. She was trying to realize what it would mean to lose the Arrowhead, the only home she had ever known. But down in her heart she knew that losing the ranch meant little to her now. All her happiness had gone with Dave.

She did have to think of Bud, however. As she kept the nervous pinto to a slow walk, she tried to look at things clearly, but her thoughts were a wild confusion of fear and worry. She was filled with a loneliness that stretched as far as the distant horizon. Life without Dave. . . How could she go on?

Tears misted her eyes. In a sudden rush of feeling, she spurred the pinto. Calico reared, streaked down the long gray stretches of sage. He bucked a little, for he was a mean little creature, with a tough mouth and flighty disposition, and Rita was jerked out of her daze, getting him quieted. Even then when he walked on, he shook his head and rolled his eyes wickedly.

RITA was nearing the narrow-gauge railroad when she first noticed that her saddle was loose. With an exclamation of annoyance, she started to dismount. Just at the moment, a whistle shrieked nearby, and an engine, with its string of rattling, swaying cars, came clattering toward them.

Calico snorted, reared. With head down, tail streaming, he spurted into a mad run.

Rita clenched with her knees, bent over the pinto's head. She pulled as best she could, but Calico went faster. Pell-mell, hell-bent for nowhere. Rita gained one of the stirrups, fought for the other, which flopped viciously.

She couldn't stay on long; she knew that. She dug her hands into the mane, gripped like death with her knees.

She was in the lava beds now. On each side of her were piles of sharp-pointed, ugly black rocks . . . and the saddle was slipping! In another minute she would be flung upon those knife-like rocks!

Then, from behind, came thundering hoofbeats. Rita felt an arm about her, sweeping her from the saddle. The next instant, instead of being pounded to jelly, she was being held tightly, in strong safe arms.

She looked up. Dave's eyes were smiling down at her: eyes as blue and as deep as the summer sky. She snuggled closer, giving herself up to the glorious ecstasy of that moment.

"Dave!" she whispered in a choked voice. "Dave!"

His arms tightened with wild fervor, holding her so close that she could feel the *thump, thump* of his heart beneath her cheek.

He bent his head, and Rita lifted her face until his lips touched hers. Again her bitterness was swept away, like dead leaves before a spring wind. Rita forgot that this man was a rustler, that he had tried to kill her brother; she knew only that she loved him, that life held nothing sweet or joyous without him.

"Rita—Rita!" His voice was desperate, tender. "Darling, we've got to straighten this out!"

"How can we?" she cried out, as memory lashed like a whip at her heart. "How can anything ever be straightened out again?"

"Poor sweet!" His tones were gentle. "It's been hard; I know it has. But if I can keep my freedom a little longer, I can finish what I started. I—"

He stopped, wheeled his horse to scan the trail behind them. A cloud of dust hid some rider, who was coming from town.

"Whoever that is," Dave said, "mustn't find me here. Wait. I'll get Calico; he's quiet now. Then you ride on, and I'll cut down the gully, back to the cave. And darling"—he was cinching on the saddle anew, lifting Rita into it— "I want you to send Bud down to the springs tonight. I think we can clear things up. But till we do—"

He pulled her down then until his lips touched hers, touched them like living fire. And then he was gone, rocks clattering as his horse slid into the gully on braced feet, and Rita was left to go her lonely way.

But the trail was not quite so lonely now, for Dave's kiss tingled on her lips. The feeling of his arms about her was fresh and sweet. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

The Only Love

IT WAS supper time when Rita rode into the ranch lane. From the meager provisions left in the larder, Mrs. Lafferty had cooked up the meal, and now she served it, then withdrew to the kitchen in tearful silence. Beans, johnnycake, a chocolate cake, the last of the wild honey.

Bud looked up, white-faced. "So that old skinflint wouldn't let you have any more credit?"

"The groceries will be out, this evening," Rita said calmly. Then, standing behind her chair and looking down at her brother, she said: "So we're going to lose the Arrowhead, this week!"

His mouth twisted. "We won't—unless you make us!"

"What do you mean?" She knew Bud was suffering, and she wanted to comfort him. But she knew she had to be hard now in order to help him. "What can I do?"

"Don't be a fool!" he growled. "What do you suppose Wallace Hale has been pickin' up all our notes for? Comin' out here, keepin' things goin'!"

"I suppose you mean that he wants to marry me," Rita said slowly. "And you're for it. After you've gambled away our home, our cattle, then you want me to buy things back for you by marrying a man I don't love, can never love!"

Bud stared at her, then his eyes went away. Rita, watching him, saw little beads of sweat stand out on his forehead, dampening the edge of his auburn hair. His hands were trembling.

"All right," Bud jerked out at last. "I didn't think it would be like this, Sis. If you can't love him"—the words came painfully—"then let it go. I'll—I'll do what I can to take care of you. I don't want you to marry and be unhappy."

"Oh, Bud!" Rita ran around, gathered his head to her shoulder. "I don't care whether I'm happy, or not. It's you! You're all I've got left. If I could be sure that you'd quit all this, the gambling, the drinking, then I'd be happy with Wallace! If keeping the Arrowhead and starting over would mean anything, then I'd pay any price!"

"Oh, I'd go straight, Rita. I swear it!" There was a trace of eagerness in Bud's tones. "I'll do anything, Sis!"

For a moment she was silent, looking down into his brown eyes. Then: "You've never lied to me, Bud, about anything. I'm going to believe you, now."

Bud choked up. "I—I don't deserve it, Sis. Gee, you're good to me. But I

promise you I'll do anything—anything!"

"Will you go down to the springs tonight and talk with Dave?" she asked. "He'll be there, and he wants to see you."

"See me?" The softness vanished from Bud's eyes. They were startled, filled with fear. "What does he want with me?"

"I don't know, but I wish you'd talk with him. I'll go, too."

"No!" he jerked out. "I'll go alone! And I'll go—"

"Hush," she broke in. "Somebody's coming, Bud."

IT WAS Wallace, all dressed up, with his sandy hair shining as if it had been greased.

"I came early with the groceries," he smiled, "for fear you might need them. And I was impatient on another score —to get the word I'm after, darling!"

Something died within Rita as she turned her eyes to him in a direct gaze. But she wanted to get the words out quickly.

"I've been talking to Bud, Wallace. He says that if we can save the Arrowhead, he'll stop the life he's leading and settle down. I don't love you, Wallace. Perhaps I never can. But if you want me—in exchange for giving the Arrowhead back—then I'll marry you, any time. And I'll try to be a good wife!"

"Why, my darling!" Wallace strode over and took her into his arms. "You couldn't be anything but good if you tried. And don't worry about loving me. I'll attend to that!"

His lips touched her cold ones in a long passionate kiss. Rita fought to keep from turning her face away, from jerking loose from his embrace. She was glad when Wallace let her go abruptly to turn to Bud, who was buckling on his gunbelts.

"Where are you going?" he asked the younger man.

Bud opened the door, flung back his words. "Got to see a guy at the springs, and I'm goin' quick and ready!"

"Bud!" Rita cried. "You can't go to Dave like that! You—"

"So you're going to see Dave Benton, are you?" Wallace demanded. "Going to let him finish what he started the other night!"

Rita caught her breath, remembering Dave's words. *"If I can keep my freedom. —I can finish what I started."*

"Bud!" Rita gasped. "Bud, wait!"

"I'm goin'—goin' to get it over with!" Bud shouted, and the door banged shut behind him. Then Rita heard his spurs jingle faster and faster, as he ran to the corrals, as if the devil himself were after him.

"I'll ride along," Wallace said. "It wouldn't be fair to let him go alone."

"I suppose not!" she choked. Nothing seemed fair, this minute. Nothing seemed worthwhile. She sank to a chair beside the kitchen table and buried her head on her arms.

"Wait here, darling!" Wallace said, and she knew that his lips brushed her hair. Then he, too, closed the door behind him, and she was left with only the ticking clock for company.

Mrs. Lafferty came in. "What's this?" she asked, gloomily. "What's Bud lightin' out for, an' him not much more'n out o' bed? Ridin' hell-bent-for-leather, an' black fear keepin' him pace!"

"He's gone to the springs," Rita said slowly. She, too, had caught Bud's fear. "I wonder what he's afraid of!"

It couldn't be Dave, she told herself. Surely, not Dave. . . .

"I'm not knowin' what's scarin' the lad." Mrs. Lafferty wiped tears from her eyes. "Only, whatever it is, will be all finished when they come back from the springs! I heard Wallace Hale sayin' them words, with his own lips!" Sniffling, Laffy went to her room.

Rita stood up, so suddenly that her

chair clattered to the floor. Bud and Wallace—gone to the springs to finish something! With Bud armed and angry!

A cry escaped Rita's lips. Her eyes widened. From the wall, she pulled down her father's gun-belt, buckled it on, breaking the gun to make sure it was loaded. Then she was outside, saddling up faster than she had ever done before, riding over the uneven, short-cut trail to the springs, sending her horse along at reckless speed.

She didn't know just what she was going to do, except to reach the springs ahead of Wallace and her brother, and warn Dave. For though Dave had proved himself unworthy of any girl's love, she knew she still loved him, would love him as long as she lived.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Heart's Choice

RITA was gaining on the other riders. She could hear their horses on the main trail, when Calico began climbing the rocky path that rimmed the canyon. She breathed easier.

She almost lost her dread as she rode on. The moon was high in the sky, but its light still mellowed the earth. A fresh, night-odor came from the sagebrush. The saddle squeaked, pleasantly. Nothing evil, surely, could happen on a night like this.

In a few moments she would be with Dave. Suddenly, as real as if he were there with her, Rita imagined she felt Dave's arms about her, felt the blessed pressure of his lips against hers. Flaming, surging happiness coursed through her veins; her heart beat faster. She bent over the pinto's neck and urged him on.

Somehow, in that moment, it didn't matter what Dave had done. Her heart trusted him, believed in him, and she condemned herself for ever doubting him, at all. Together they would work everything out. If Dave were truly at fault, she would forgive him, love him, help him to make it right. Every woman had the right to do that for the man she loved. Even a lifetime wouldn't be too long. A lifetime —with Dave!

Then a shot crackled the stillness.

Rita stopped Calico, staring, wide-eyed, into the night. The shot had come from the springs.

Another sound echoed now; hoofbeats were drumming up the grade. Rita heard the rocks sliding beneath the reckless hoofs of a hard-ridden horse.

She kneed Calico off the trail, into the shadows, just as a rider went hurtling by. The moon was hidden behind a cloud, and Rita got no glimpse of the man who urged his horse on at such cruel speed. But it was not Dave; that much she knew. Her heart would have recognized his lean, saddle-easy figure.

She had to find Dave. The rider was past, now, and Rita urged the pinto down the grade, down the tracks the other had made, coming up. Plunging, slipping, Calico came at last to the springs.

For a moment, she could see nothing there. She just sat her saddle, looking around desperately, her heartbeats sounding like a drum in her ears.

Then her horror-filled eyes spied the huddled heap on the ground.

She jumped down from the saddle, bent over the figure that lay sprawled, face downward, on the hard earth. On the back of his shoulder was a small bullet-hole, with blood flowing down his flannel shirt. Rita didn't need to turn him over to know who it was.

"Dave!" she choked.

She bent and kissed him, held him cradled for a moment, before she snatched off her own kerchief, tried to staunch the bleeding. She didn't hear returning hoofbeats, until a rock-shower clattered down the canyon wall, almost upon her.

Rita turned, holding Dave's head protectively on her left arm, while with her right she drew her gun, levelled it toward

the rider who leaped from the saddle.

The moon came out in time to save him, for it showed Bud's face, white and tortured, framed with disheveled auburn hair.

"Bud!" Aghast, Rita lowered the gun.

"Go ahead, shoot!" he husked. "I deserve it! I came back, hopin' somebody would shoot me. I had to kill him, Sis, but I couldn't run away. I—I couldn't!"

"Bud, you didn't do this!" Despair surged in Rita's voice, as she tried again to staunch the bleeding. "You couldn't!"

THE boy's breath came in long shuddering sobs. "I shot wide at the last minute, but he moved! Dave moved, then he fell. And he's dead. I killed him!"

Rita tried to speak, to tell him that Dave wasn't dead, that he had just now stirred in her arms, but Bud went on, hoarsely. "I never meant to kill him. I shot him, then started to run away. Wallace gave me money enough to get to Mexico, but I had to come back. I'll give myself up, Sis! I'll tell everything. I lied to you, Rita. On the night of the weddin', I lied to you for the first time. Dave kept quiet to protect me, but I lied, and—"

Once again a gun barked. Bud's words ended in a choking moan. His bony-wristed hand clawed at his side. He turned slightly and fell, his face toward Rita.

"Got to tell anyway, Sis!" he choked out. "I was the rustler, not Dave. I piled up gambling debts, big ones, with Wallace. Then I cut out a few of Dave's cattle to pay them off! Wallace found it out, and held it over me. He's bled me ever since! I was a fool—and scared, Rita, so I done what Wallace said to do! I rustled with Len Swarky! Made Wallace rich! And all the time he was after me, leechin' me. He wanted the ranch—and you!"

"It's all right, Bud!" Rita tried desperately to soothe him. "Just knowing Dave didn't do it, makes everything right. We'll work things out, Bud!"

"Sure! But I can't make up for what happened on your weddin' night. Dave caught us rustlin'—Len and me. He caught us there with Wallace! Dave shot me before he knew who I was. He shot Len, too—and Len almost got him! Then Wallace said we had to lie—or be hung! I hated to lie, Sis, an' now I'm tellin—"

"It's all right, Bud! All right," Rita soothed, as if he were a very young child.

"I was a fool, because I was scared!" Bud babbled. "But I'm past that! I want you—to be happy, Sis! I—"

Some warning inner thing made Rita glance up—into the deadly eyes of Wallace Hale. He had slipped from the brush, and his gun was leveled at Bud.

WITH the quickness of a wild cat, Rita moved. One instant she was kneeling between the two wounded men. The next, she had used her bent knee as a spring, and was hurtling herself straight at Wallace Hale.

She caught his arm, threw him off-balance for the fraction of a second, but only for that small heartbeat of time. Then Wallace Hale swung her around, into the vise-like grip of his left arm, held her there so tightly that she could make only a feeble struggle against him.

"You killer!" She had to keep his attention from Dave, who might stir again, at any time, and Wallace mustn't know that Dave still lived. "You'll hang for this—for everything!"

Wallace laughed. "Oh, no, sweet. Bud and Dave'll be through talkin', and folks'll think Bud killed Dave, then lost his grit and shot himself, like the white-livered brush-rabbit he is! I got to finish what I started. I'll get your ranch, and you thrown in! You see, darling. I always finish what I start!"

"You think I'd marry you?"

"I know you won't! I'm takin' you away tonight, sweet. I'm keepin' you, till you'll be beggin' me to marry you! You're mine!" His hot breath was on her cheek.

Still holding Rita, so tight that her breath was a rasp in her throat, he took steady aim at Bud, who stared back, white-faced.

"Go on!" Bud jerked out. "Shoot! Only you can't harm Rita! I won't let you. Even if I'm gone, I still—won't."

Wallace thumbed back the hammer of the gun.

"You—devil!" Desperately, Rita struggled to throw herself between Bud and that evil gun. "You—"

Her voice was lost in the report of a gun that barked just a second before Wallace pulled the trigger. The fire in Wallace's gun spat harmlessly into the air. Rita was abruptly released, as Wallace coughed, walked two steps, then fell like a half-full meal-sack, to the ground.

Whirling, Rita saw Dave raised painfully on one elbow, trying to grin.

"Reckon you got a job on your hands, darling," he said. "Gettin' us shot-up cripples home."

Rita's laughter was flavored with sobs. She was down on her knees, holding him close. "Dave, Dave!" she cried, joyously. "You're going to live, and forgive me . . . because I love you so!"

IT WASN'T much of a job, after all, getting the wounded men home. Bud's wound was only a deep graze, and once it was bandaged with his own kerchief, he was able to ride back to the ranchhouse, and get the men to come with the buckboard, and to send for the sheriff.

Two hours later, the sheriff hauled the badly-wounded young banker away, the doctor riding along with him. Back home, Bud was left at ease, his conscience cleared by confession, his heart lightened by forgiveness. He lay in bed, fast asleep, the drawn lines already erased from his face.

Dave was in bed, too, and over him Rita spread the sunflower quilt that had been her mother's best.

"Rita!" Dave's hand held hers, tightly, "Darling sweet, did you mean what you said at the springs tonight, about still lovin' me?"

She nodded her flaming head.

"Then say it again, honey."

"I love you, Dave," she smiled. "Love you—love you!" Then, with a little rush, she went on. "But I don't deserve your forgiveness! The way I doubted you. And tonight, Bud shooting you—"

"Bud only thinks he shot me," Dave said soberly. "Wallace Hale did it, when Bud's shot went wild. And a lot of what's happened has been my fault. I knew Bud was rustlin', suspected Hale was behind it, but I thought that, once I was Bud's brother, I could straighten things."

"And then—we were all against you! Her voice broke. "You hadn't a chance!"

"Bud was my chance," Dave said. "I knew the kid would come straight, once I got well enough to meet him—alone."

"And you didn't even get that chance," Rita breathed. "Wallace went with him."

"It's all past, now, darling!" Dave reached up one arm, drew Rita closer. "We'll let Bud run the Arrowhead by himself, pick up those notes at the bank, and settle everything. And there'll be another wedding, with my bride all in her white gown—everything just right!"

Rita's eyes were starry. *"Something old, something new!"* she quoted. "I know now what that really means! It's love, unchanging."

"Something borrowed, something blue!" Dave teased.

"It's the happiness—borrowed from heaven," Rita said, her voice husky with the joy that held her. "True blue, always. "And *a bit of gold* . . . it's the gold in her life! Love—the only real gold."

She bent down until her lips touched Dave's, and knew she had spoken rightly. Love was as old as time . . . as new as this latest kiss.

THE END

Feudists' Love Runs Wild

By Jack Sterrett

SUE BROWN awoke with the sudden choking feeling that something was wrong. She kicked off her blankets and ran into the front room of the little homestead shanty, without bothering about a light. She went to her father's bed. It was empty.

Her father had gone to kill Zeke Tanner! Sue was sure of it. He had come home from Trailhead a little tipsy, grum-

"I killed your daddy!" On a wild black night of frontier feud, the tall young Texan Sue loved spoke those fateful words—and still she prayed that he'd take her in his blessed arms and make her dream-romance come true!

Slowly her eyes lifted to Roy's dark bitter face.

bling about Tanner. He had been growling about Tanner for days. And now he had sneaked out. He had headed for the crude camp that Tanner had set up since driving his longhorns up the trail from Texas two months ago.

With frantic fingers, Sue managed to light the lamp. Its teetery chimney crashed to the floor as she lifted it, but the smoky snaking flame was enough. Her father's long Frontier-model sixgun was gone from its hook by the door. Sue smothered the cry that leaped to her throat.

Lamp in hand, Sue darted back to her room. Kerosene slopped out as she plunked the lamp on the floor and snatched for clothes. A boy's shirt, trousers, boots —there was no time for more. She hurried out of the house and to the corral.

Her dad, Andy Brown—and Zeke Tanner! Trouble between them had started in Texas before she was born. Andy and Zeke had fought originally over a woman, then had rustled each other's stock. They had shot at each other a dozen times in twenty years. Andy had pulled out first, heading north with his motherless daughter. But Zeke was here now with his son, swearing that no yellow-bellied snake of a Brown was going to keep him from settling where he wished.

There was no time for Sue to head for Trailhead, and it was two miles to the ranch of Tam Grainger, the new sheriff-cattleman. If she went for help she would be too late. Maybe she was too late already. Maybe her father had already killed Zeke Tanner!

Sue sobbed wildly and tried to ride faster. Her little sorrel made the effort gamely but was already outreaching himself. Sue's hair blew in a wild mass behind her. Her knees, unprotected by leather, were ripped and torn by savage brush as she plunged recklessly cross-country. She felt no hurt. She was breathless with wild haste.

At the foot of the rise below Tanner's camp, the exhausted pony struck a stone and lunged. Sue was thrown, striking earth with a lung-smashing shock. Stunned, aching for breath, she tried to scramble up the hill afoot.

Her voice was a gasping sob: "Dad! Dad! Come back!"

She labored up the hill toward the big crude tent, ghostly in the dark. She stumbled and fell, somehow got up again. Why had she heard no shots? She was too late! Her ears roared, her heart trying to leap clear out of her chest. There was a light bobbing before her eyes.

It was a lantern in Roy Tanner's hand. Roy was running down the hill toward her, with nothing on but his boots and trousers. Sue snatched at him.

"Roy! Where's dad? He came up here."

Roy's young tanned face was a piece of dark stone. The light of the lantern in his hand threw his features upward in jagged bitterness. He did not meet Sue's gaze. He said nothing.

Sue pounded his bronzed chest. "Where's dad?"

Roy's lips moved stiffly. "He killed pop —rammed 'im in the back with a slug. Pop never had a chanct!" The boy was motionless as stone.

Sue's thudding heart leaped up and sank. Her stomach turned over. Fear suddenly returned. "But where's dad? He didn't get hurt?"

Roy stood stiff against her clutching hands. "Yeah—he got hurt." Suddenly his voice broke wildly. "I hope he's dead!"

Sue jerked away. For the first time, she saw the long-barreled sixgun clutched rigidly in Roy's hand.

"Roy! You—didn't shoot dad?"

"I hope he's dead!" Roy yelled passionately. "Damn 'im, he never gave pop a chanct!"

SUE stood for an instant, her face drained and white. She lifted her hands and dropped them, a sob torn from

her throat. With a wheeling startled motion, she turned and ran up the hill.

Roy followed. Expressionless and motionless, like a man of dark stone again, he stood and looked down on her agony.

After a time Sue ceased to cry. She slipped down in the dark brown grass and her sobs died gradually away. She held only the growing coldness of her father's thin lifeless hand between the warmth of her soft and living palms. She had managed to close his eyes. Perhaps he had died instantly. It was just as well—if he *had* to die!

Slowly, as if the coldness of death crept up from her father's unlovely hand through her veins to her heart, an ugly icy fury spread through her. Slowly her eyes lifted to Roy's dark bitter face. She arose and faced him.

Her words were a freezing bitter stream, falling drop by drop on his face of stone.

Roy stood motionless. His eyes were opaque and dead. He was seeing nothing with them. Finally the girl's blazing words came to an end. He twitched his shoulders uneasily and shoved the sixgun into a hip-pocket of his trousers. His chest looked smooth and hard and yellow in the light of the lantern. But still his eyes saw nothing.

"Reckon I'll never know," Roy said tonelessly, "why I loved you from the minute I first saw you. Reckon if I never had loved you, my pop an' yours would still be alive. They shouldn't have hated so much. They were too old for hard hatin'."

Sue laughed wildly. "So you loved me—and never told! But still, your father and mine found out and were bound to finish their hate before you spoke to me. You mooned around me, and it was plain to both of them. Anybody could have told. Acting like a moony calf!"

She taunted him with hatred. Her wide sweet mouth was thin with bitterness. He had killed her father.

Far down, deep beneath the opaque unseeing surface of Roy's eyes, something hot began to grow. He seemed less like stone now, and more like flesh. Suddenly he looked directly down into her eyes, and the heat beneath his gaze flared up. He seized her by the shoulders, dropping his lantern. The lantern smashed out against the ground.

"I don't care," Roy yelled. "I'm glad I killed 'im—the way he went for pop!"

His fingers bit deep into her shoulders. He was strong. His chest and neck swelled up and his fingers bit in like steel. To keep from screaming, Sue set her teeth.

"He killed my pop!" Roy cried. "An' it's all your fault, a-makin' me love you! They was too old to hate hard. It wasn't until they began to find out that I an' you was in love. I didn't want to love you. I an' you—a Tanner an' a Brown!"

Sue tore herself away from his fingers. Like ice, again, her scorn began to drip heavily.

They were unconscious of the dark, unconscious now of the huddled bodies of the two old men, just beyond their feet in the grass. They were unconscious of the queer ghastly glow that had begun to beat through the dark.

"Speak for yourself," scorned Sue. "I and you—and love!" Again her laughter mocked him.

Quite suddenly, Roy's eyes were stone again. His arms whipped out and jerked her from her feet. He crushed her to his hard arching chest and placed his lips on hers.

Sue kicked and scratched. She tried to scream, but her voice was choked away. A hootowl was startled from the brush up the dark side of the hill. It flopped across the forehead of a yellow moon.

Suddenly Sue fought no more. She was limp and exhausted in Roy's arms, her forehead on his shoulder, an aching sob in her throat. For they couldn't hate each other, she and Roy. She understood that

clearly, understood that nothing but their love would ever matter. They simply—couldn't hate.

"SUE!" Roy sobbed suddenly. "Oh, God! Why did I have to kill your dad?"

"It's all right," Sue said gently. "It's all right." Her hand was soothing his cheek where she had scratched him. "It's all right, Roy."

Suddenly she stiffened. The strange light which had been flickering through the dark had at last forced itself upon her attention, like a red warning.

"Roy!" She jerked away. "Roy! Our house is on fire!" She remembered the lamp that had sloshed kerosene on her bedroom floor. "Our house is on fire!"

Roy said nothing. He seemed unable to comprehend. His eyes stared dazedly down the hill, skipped the tops of the rolling hills and saw the distant flare of the flames.

Sue turned and ran toward the big tent. She snatched at clothing and thrust it into Roy's stumbling hands. She slipped the sixgun from the pocket at his hip, but he failed to notice.

"You'll have to run," Sue cried. "We didn't see. We don't know how long it's been burning. Tam Grainger'll notice. He'll be on his way."

Roy looked dumbly at the clothing in his hands. He began to pull his shirt over his head. Sue ran excitedly a little way down the hill and back.

"Hurry! Hurry, Roy! Don't you understand? Grainger'll come here and find your father and mine. You'll have to ride! Ride down the hill and across the wallows. Head across the buffalo canyons and into the desert. You know the big ship rock? I'll come for you there in a day, and Tam'll never catch you. I'll hold him here tonight."

Roy's mind refused to move. His eyes held fast to her face as he backed toward the flimsy pole corral beyond the tent. There was a groping wondering look in his gaze.

"Sue! You aren't hating me? You love me?"

Sue dragged him almost bodily to the corral. "Saddle up, Roy—and ride!"

"All right," he nodded. "You'll be safe with Tam. But if you don't come for me, I'll come for you."

She left him swiftly saddling a horse, a part of the blackness of the corral. She returned to the tent and picked up his gun. She went out to the bodies of the two old men, queer clods of darkness in the grass. She sat down beside them, the gun in her lap, and watched the distant fire across the hills.

The moon was red with smoke. With her face turned to the light, Sue simply sat and waited. There was an oddly restful feeling in her chest as she groped with her fingers until she found her father's hand. Its stiffness shocked her, but she did not recoil. That feeling in her chest had bred an acceptance of his death, of anything which now might come.

"I'm sorry, Dad," she murmured. "I'm sorry Roy did it. But I can't feel it very much. Can you understand—just a little? It's your own fault that you came here with hate in your heart—and died."

THE distant fire died out as Sue waited. A hound bayed. Somebody shouted. The black figures of two horsemen and a hound suddenly came up the hill. Sue did not get up. One of the men cursed and held up a lantern, throwing its strong yellow light on her expressionless face.

"Look here! By jeepers, what's this?"

The two men stared down at her. She stood up, and the hound sniffed at her and bristled at the corpses. Above the glare of the lantern, Sue saw the faces of the men standing out as though they had no bodies. Tam Grainger and Lew Schindler,

Tam's hired man. Tam's stare was straight, honest and hard, as clean as the gleam of the silver star on his vest. But ugly Lew Schindler's mouth sagged down as he stared at the rip in Sue's trousers above her knee. He looked down and away from her eyes.

"Hell!" big Tam Grainger said. "It doesn't make sense. What did your daddy come up here to git killed for? I warned 'im to stay away from Tanner."

"He didn't come to get killed," Sue said stonily. "He came to kill Zeke Tanner."

Tam and Lew slid down from their horses.

"I told dad," said Sue, staring into Tam's steady gray eyes, "that if he didn't forget his hate for Tanner, I'd leave him. I told him that I was in love with Roy, and that Roy had asked me to marry him. Dad swore he'd kill Zeke Tanner. He said that if he killed Zeke, Roy wouldn't have me. I told dad I'd kill him—my own dad—if he did that. Well, I've done it." Her fingers caressed Roy's gun.

Tam Grainger held out his hand and she gave up the gun. He looked at it steadily for awhile, his big thumb rubbing the initials R. T. that were scratched on the butt. There was a queer look in his eyes when he stared at her again. But Sue had no interest in what Tam believed or did not believe. Roy would get away. She was making time for him. No hound nor posse could follow him, once he had crossed the desert and into the badlands.

"Where's Roy?" Tam grunted.

Sue shrugged. "I don't know. He was in Trailhead today. I saw him go down the trail."

Tam looked at Lew Schindler. "Did you see Roy in town today?"

Lew's eyes were fixed on Sue's boots. His gaze flickered to hers for an instant. "Yeah," said Lew. "Reckon I saw Roy in town—late." He looked quickly and carefully away and spat tobacco juice into the dark grass.

Tam Grainger looked hard at the gun in his hands. He stared at the crumpled forms of the old men.

"Put 'em in the tent," he ordered the hulking Schindler. He looked at Sue again. "We'll take you to my house. My wife'll take care of you tonight. I don't believe a word you said."

Sue shrugged. It meant nothing to her, except that they were not looking for Roy. By the time they reached Grainger's, Roy would be miles on his way. She felt no gratitude to Lew Schindler because he had lied for her. Lew was beneath her contempt.

MRS. GRAINGER received her kindly and without questions. Sue was grateful for that. She was grateful, too, when the gaunt sheriff's wife, with a murmured apology, locked her in a small back bedroom. She was glad to be alone with her own thoughts and away from Schindler's shifting gaze.

Sue sat in darkness on the edge of a cot and thought about Roy. Roy had not dreamed of the story she would tell or he would never have gone. She was glad that he had been too dazed to think clearly. He would come back when she did not come to meet him.

Her tired mind refused to go further. She had done as much as she had on nerve alone, and now she felt collapsed. One thing she knew, she would have to convince Tam Grainger that she was guilty. Yes, somehow, she would have to prove that before Roy came back. Tam had not believed her.

Sue had no way of knowing how long she sat there in the dark. . . . An hour, two hours maybe. Her mind weaved slowly, her breath coming quick and soft whenever she thought of Roy. Suddenly she was aware of a scraping sound at the shutters of the one small window which locked her in. Quickly alert and rigid, she saw the shutters moved aside, to reveal a

small square of star-studded sky. She moved swiftly to the opening.

Lew Schindler's breath came in to her, sharp and sour with whiskey. She saw the shape of his hulking head.

His whisper was hoarse, his words thick. "I been sweet on you for a long time, Sue. Ain't I as good as that Tanner kid? Suppose I let you get away. You an' me could go off somewheres. I'd marry you."

Sue's answer was to scramble quickly through the window and drop to the ground beside him. Her mind rioted. She could handle this drunken fool. She could —and she would!

She heard Lew's hoarse gratified chuckle, felt his huge rough paws fumbling at her. With sudden savage energy, she pushed at him with all her strength and he reeled away from her, stumbling clumsily backward in the dark. Wheeling, Sue ran like a deer around a corner of the house.

Schindler uttered a lurid curse, and lurched after her. As he lumbered around the corner, a large black shadow loomed up and there was the sound of a shocking blow. Schindler crashed heavily forward on his face.

Sue heard the sound of his fall. Peering wildly over her shoulder as she ran toward Grainger's corral, she saw nothing. There was no sound, no movement. Schindler was not getting up, not following her.

Her breath was caught on a gasping sob. The great fool must have stumbled and knocked himself unconscious. Pray God that he had!

GAUNT big-boned Mary Grainger watched her square-jawed husband for a long time in silence after he came in and seated himself, without speaking or turning up the barely-glowing lamp. He stared speechlessly at his smashed huge-knuckled right hand.

"Tam," Mary Grainger said softly, "do you think Sue'll have sense enough to stop at Tanner's tent and pick up the money Roy's father kept hidden there?"

Tam looked at her queerly. "Sue thinks fast," he grunted. "I reckon mebbe she'll attend to that. I reckon Tanner had enough so's Sue an' Roy can git clear away an' make a clean start somewhere."

His wife smiled softly. "You did right, Tam. There's no call for Roy and Sue to suffer because of the crazy hate of those two old fools, their fathers. You did right to let Sue escape."

Tam stared, his face expressionless. "I didn't let Sue escape!" he grunted sharply. "Lew Schindler turned her loose." He glowered at the broken skin on his big knuckles. "I bashed Lew awful hard for that. I reckon he'll never understand what hit 'im. But I'll have to fire 'im. He's bad. An' I got to uphold the law around here."

Mary Grainger smiled softly again. "You're a good lawman, Tam. You're the best sheriff this district ever had."

For a precious second she thought he was going to kiss her.

Dark-Trail Saddlemates

By Christopher Dane

In a gunman's laughing eyes, brave little Sally York read the glorious, exciting future that was hers, if she dared ride the moonlit danger trails beyond the law. . . . And, in the flaming cross-fire of guns outside a raided bank, she made her tragic choice!

AFTERWARD, Sally York couldn't remember whom she was dancing with when she looked up and saw the stranger standing there in the doorway. He was taller than the others at that end of the low-ceilinged hall. That may have been why she noticed him in the first place. But the thing that held her, that set a strange little pulse throbbing in her throat, was the self-possessed, almost arrogant, set of his head—and those laughing eyes of his.

They were on her.

Sally had tried to look away. Certainly she had never seen him before. He was probably grinning at some joke the tough little hardcase beside him had made, and in a second he would turn and answer. But he did not turn. Confused, she smiled uncertainly. Then was more confused than ever, and could feel a warm flush mounting to her cheeks.

She breathed a little sigh of relief when another couple glided across that magnetic, demanding line of vision. She knew she was being silly, but for that one chaotic moment she had had the childish, reasonless notion that those insistent, reckless happy eyes were only inches from her own, and that she was smiling up into them.

Then the way opened again, a fiddle and drum swung into a lively bar, and she saw him coming across the floor—toward her. He was tall and lean, and there was a lithe, strong grace to his stride. From his garb, he might have been an ordinary puncher, but the two filled holsters strapped low on his thighs marked him for something other than a thirty-a-month cowboy.

She must not let him dance with her. Folks would talk if Sally York, whose father was running for sheriff, was seen dancing with a stranger, a man who packed two guns. Breathlessly, her lips tried to say, "No," when he touched the arm of her cowboy partner, but her heart would not frame the word. And then she was in his arms.

"So here I am." The warm breath of his words played through her golden silk hair.

Her heartbeat quickened. She forced her eyes up above the checked flannel horizon of his breast. Somehow her feet kept moving in response to his lead, following the music vaguely.

"Do you always smile like that," he asked, with a laugh, "when you want somebody to cut in?"

He was making fun of her! It was like a chilling cloudburst on her stampeding heart. "Why, the very idea!" she gasped. "I most certainly did not want you to cut in! Why!"

"But you smiled," he said, blandly confident, those maddening eyes of his grinning down into hers.

"I did nothing of the sort!" She was furious at herself for not simply disengaging herself and walking away. "Do you think I'd smile at a gunman, or at any man I did not know?"

"You smiled at me, anyway."

"After next week," she flared, "men like you won't even be allowed here. When my father is elected sheriff, there won't be any gun-toters at the Cross River dances." But the anger was going fast. That last ended weakly, uncertainly, under the crystal blue, almost hypnotic, power of those eyes that looked down into hers. "Anyway," she added lamely, "even if I did smile, it was because I thought I knew you." She turned her head down and drew decorously back as they swung with the music.

"You do—now. I'm Jim Stanton, and I'm here looking for your father." His head bent to her ear then, and his whispered, "Now will you stop pouting?"

There it was again, that wild pulse in her throat. Why, just to hear him speak set it pounding. She closed her eyes, to shut out the rest of the world . . . .

THE music stopped. Reluctantly Sally drew out of his arms, as the laughing, chattering couples drifted off the floor. They were her friends, these others—booted riders from the nearby ranches, town girls and boys she had grown up with, neighbors she saw and talked with every day in the year. But now she was actually afraid one of them would come over to speak to her—and bring her tumbling back from this glorious dream.

"Do—do you want to go outside?" she asked tremulously. "It's so warm in here." She knew that sounded silly, like the sort of thing a schoolgirl might have said. But you can't tell a man you've known only five minutes that you want to be alone with him, out under the western stars, far from the prying eyes of people who wouldn't understand.

"Yes, you little angel." And something in his voice told her he had read the secret locked in her heart. "You know, Sally York, you are a little angel."

"You know my name," she said, wonderingly, as he led her out through the side door into the soft, rich starlight. Then she remembered he had said he was looking for her father.

"Yes. But it wouldn't matter especially if I didn't. I could go through the rest of my born days just calling you 'honey' or 'sweetheart' or something. Would you mind that, honey?"

He was holding her off at arm's length, his two hands grasping her soft bare arms just below the shoulders. Even in this obscure light she could detect the faint grin wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. She wished he wouldn't laugh when he said things like that.

"No, Jim Stanton," she said softly, solemnly. "I wouldn't mind."

Then those long, powerful arms of his were around her. His lips were warm against hers. A dizzying riot of flame swept her senses. Her breasts ached under the pressure of his lean, hard body. She tried to close her eyes, but found them staring up, fascinated, half-frightened, into his. And his were laughing no longer; they were hungry and pleading.

He drew breath. "You sweet! You darling!" he whispered. Then her lips lifted brazenly to claim his again.

What wickedness was this? Her singing nerve ends told her it was no wickedness at all, but the sweet, glorious paradise of her dreams. But love couldn't come like this, like a rushing, all-engulfing flood sweeping through the foothill arroyos. This couldn't be love, this sudden fire and ice dancing through her veins. Yet she knew it was. Other girls might pick their way carefully to the Eden of love—but for her, it had come, wildly, blindingly, in the flash of a stranger's smile.

Abruptly the pressure of his arms eased, and his head drew back. Sally clutched his shirt front, clinging to him. Her knees felt like soft rubbery things that would never hold her weight again.

"Jim!" she breathed. "Jim, do you—do you feel the way I do? You do love me, Jim!"

The expression on his face startled her. The heavy twin grooves of a frown penciled up from betwen his brows. There was a set, hard look to his mouth. Had she done something to anger him? Did he think her a brazen coquette for giving her lips so freely, so willingly? Couldn't he see in her eyes that she loved him?

"I'm sorry I did that," he said, and his voice was remote as the wind across snow-capped mountain peaks.

"Sorry?" Sally repeated weakly. "Jim, there isn't anything to be sorry about—or ashamed about." And, to herself, she added, "There can't be—when two people are in love."

"You don't understand." He reached up and took her hands and gently broke their hold on his shirt front. "I forgot for a minute," he said. "I'm sorry. You—you just don't understand."

MISERABLY, Sally York thought she did understand. He didn't love her! He'd just been playing at love! She felt shamed, unclean. She wanted to run away, to some place where she would be all by herself, and could cry her heart out. She wanted to slip back into the leather riding skirt she had worn, coming in to the dance, and get Bluebell from the stable out back, and ride at a full run across the prairies . . . .

But, instead, she laughed. He had been laughing when he crossed the floor to dance with her; she laughed now. She couldn't trust herself with words, but maybe that would convince him how little it mattered, how little she cared.

"Stop that," he said brusquely, harshly. He grasped her shoulder and shook her. "All this isn't in the bargain." She looked at him wonderingly. "I came here tonight to see your father—to give him a break. I didn't come here to get mixed up with you. I'm going to lead him to the hideout of the Gila Kid. Your father isn't at the Bent Arrow. I tried there. Where is he?"

So that was it! Didn't want to 'get mixed up' with her, indeed! He had come to her only because of her father. She herself meant nothing to him. All right, if that's the way he wanted it . . . But why should he, obviously a gunman, want to lead her father to the Gila Kid, one of his own kind? If he'd been double-crossing a fellow bandit, wouldn't he have gone to Sheriff Bascom, rather than to her father? Her father was no lawman—yet.

"If you know so much about the Gila Kid," she said, loftily, "you ought to know that father would be with the posse that's chasing him. I suppose they're down around the Border by now, unless they've caught up with him. He was supposed to have headed south this afternoon, after stopping the Red Butte stage. But why isn't it the sheriff you want to see, if you've decided to turn in the—your friend, the Gila Kid?"

There was a tight, inscrutable, knowing little smile at his lip corners. "You've got it all figured out, I see . . . . No, they haven't caught up with him yet."

He knew too much about this Gila Kid. Yet, strangely, she was sorry for the way she had flared up at him. He made her feel like a little girl who has been scolded, when he talked like that. Even if he was an outlaw, he had asked her a decent, civil question, and she had snapped at him like a bad-tempered child. And, anyway, it didn't make any difference what he was; with him standing there in the moonlight, looking down at her, the memory of that moment in his arms was too vivid, too ecstatically near.

"If you want to come out to the Bent Arrow tomorrow," she said, hurriedly trying to make amends, "father ought to be back. And—and I wish you would, anyway."

"No, tonight's the only chance. I'll be long gone by tomorrow."

Sally took a deep breath. "Gone?" she repeated. Tomorrow he would be gone? But that couldn't be! He had only come into her life tonight. And, even if he didn't care now, he would learn to. No, he mustn't go out of her life before he had learned to care.

She caught at a straw. "I'll go with you. Yes," she rushed on, as she saw the refusal in his eyes, "I'll go in father's place. Don't you see? You can show me the hideout, and then I can take father there later—and he can capture the Kid. Oh, it's a wonderful idea! Dad's sure to be elected if he brings in the Gila Kid, after that stage holdup today and all—"

"No." His refusal was blunt, final. "Since your dad's away, the whole thing's called off. I'll be leaving now."

Sally grasped his arm and stopped him as he turned away. "But—"

"No 'buts'."

"Oh, don't be so—so—such a ninny!" She was close to tears, he was so madden-

ingly superior. "I don't give a darn about the Gila Kid's hideout. But I should think you might offer to ride home with me. After all—" Her voice was all choked up, and she suddenly realized that she really was crying.

"You poor kid!" Tender and soothing, his arm went about her shoulder. His clean bandana was dabbing away the tears. For a precious second she thought he was going to kiss her. A moonbeam found its way through the leaves overhead, to touch the clean, strong line of his jaw, so thrillingly close to her upturned face.

Then the second was past. And, self-contained, even smiling a little, he said, "All right, you poor little kid, I'll ride out toward the Bent Arrow with you." Then, as though purposely puncturing the last small balloon of that moment's happiness: "It's on my way, anyhow."

IN THE small side room where Sally York was changing from dance frock and pumps to woolly green blouse and leather riding skirt and boots, she was glad she was alone. Here she could shut her eyes and imagine herself back there in the moonlight, in his arms. The other, the unaccountable change that had come over him to chill that moment of bliss, she was able to force to the dark back recesses of her mind.

She pulled tight the rawhide lacing of her boot, got up and fitted her holster belt about her slim waist. Her father had given her that, and the pearl-handled .32 that hung in the holster, months ago when the depredations of the Gila Kid had begun. Fleetingly, the feel of the gun against her thigh reminded her of the danger of riding at night with a stranger, a man who had as much as admitted that he was a bandit. She brushed the little thread of fear aside, laughed at her reflection in the mirror.

Her heart was unreasonably light, as she opened the door. The music rushed in, thrumming through her veins like heady wine. This was her night, hers and Jim Stanton's. It was good to be alive.

As soon as she was through the door, she singled him out. It was almost as though he had called to her. It flashed across her mind that that, too, was significant.

He was across the hall, by the outside door, talking with two other men. One Sally recognized as the wiry little hardcase who had been standing beside him earlier that evening. The other—she blinked, and looked again—the other was Whip Vinson, the Shantytown political boss. And Vinson was one man who would have to be put behind bars, she had heard her father say, before there ever could be any real law-enforcement in Butte County.

Vinson had a hand on Jim's shoulder, in a familiar attitude. He was doing most of the talking, apparently in guarded tones, and Jim nodded his understanding.

The thin little voices of suspicion that had been whispering at the back of Sally's mind spoke right out loud. A sudden, sharp thrust of fear pressed her back a step, and she clutched the dressing room doorknob, half-inclined to go back inside and somehow get word to him that she had changed her mind. He was a gunman. Clearly, he was a friend of Whip Vinson, her father's sworn enemy. She had never seen him till barely half an hour ago. That story about the Gila Kid's hideout hadn't quite rung true. For all she knew, he himself might be the Gila Kid.

He caught her eyes just then, and broke away from Vinson. In the seconds he took to cross the floor, she made up her mind. She would go with him. Even if he was the Gila Kid, she must go with him. Whatever he had been, or had done, didn't matter. He was Jim Stanton, the man she had trusted when she had lifted her lips to him in the moonlight. Suddenly, she knew the most important thing in the world was proof that her heart did not deceive her.

He looked her over approvingly as he came up, grinned at sight of the .32 holstered at her waist. "You won't need the pea-shooter," he chuckled. "But it makes a pretty ornament—for a girl who's ridin' with a gunman."

She smiled. "That's all it is. An ornament." She hoped he didn't think she carried the gun as protection against him. She wasn't afraid.

As she went out into the night with him, it was like stepping from one world into another. Someone called after her, probably some cowboy she had promised a dance later on. She pretended not to hear. Behind lay the known, the steady, safe routine of yesterday. She didn't want that; she had made her decision. Ahead lay the thrilling magic of the unknown.

"You must know that man I was talking with back there—Whip Vinson," Jim said as they picked their way down the dark lane to the stable. "Aren't you wondering why I'd have any truck with an hombre like Vinson, who's doing his damnedest to keep your daddy out of the sheriff's office?"

"Not especially." Sally shrugged. "I suppose a man who's new in a place has to be friendly to everyone."

Suspicions, doubts, questions had no part in this world that lay ahead. His arm was linked in hers, his hand warm against her palm, as he walked at her side. That was all that counted.

AS THEY cantered, stirrup to stirrup, down the long lane to the street, it seemed that now, at last, she could leave fear—and those recurrent, insistent little twinges of doubt—behind. But he was not yet quite ready to turn his back on the town.

"I've got to pick up a sack of stuff I left behind the hardware store," he said. "It'll just take a minute."

The hardware store was in the building next to the bank. That should have warned her. But she took his reins, without question, as he swung to the ground and disappeared into the dark-shadowed alleyway between the hardware store and bank.

A heavy, muffled quiet hung over the dark street. It suddenly occurred to her that the lantern in front of the bank was unlighted. That was odd. There was always supposed to be a light there, from dusk till dawn. Now it was out, and the uncertain illumination from the windows of the Palace Bar, across the street and nearly fifty yards away, was the nearest light.

Out of the corner of an eye, Sally caught movement across the street. She tensed in the saddle. It was a vague, indeterminate thing, little more than the half-seen swaying of a tree branch or the flapping of a loose tarpaulin in the wind. But there was no wind. And there lingered in her senses the impression that a figure had darted out from the portico of the blacksmith shop, and now stood crouched behind the black contour of the parked freight wagon across there.

She glanced anxiously up the alleyway into which Jim had disappeared. A gunman would have enemies, vicious, murderous enemies who would think nothing of shooting him down in cold blood. That furtive figure over there might be waiting to waylay Jim.

Now she could hear him coming down the alley, at a half run. She called sharply, "Wait, Jim!"

He didn't seem to hear. He debouched from the blackness, slung the sack he carried over the pommel of his saddle, and swung up.

"Over there, across the street!" she said. "There's—"

Abruptly the night exploded. A thunderous, ear-splitting blast of gunfire reverberated up the false-fronted walls of the narrow cowtown street. Red spurts of powder flame lanced out from the shadowy cover of the freight wagon. And down the

street, the batwing doors of the Palace Bar slammed open and men came running out.

"Bank robbery! It's a bank robbery!" a frenzied voice shouted.

Jim wasted no time. "This way!" he clipped, swinging his horse around. "Ride the spurs!"

He hadn't fired a shot. He hadn't even drawn his gun. Hoofs hammering, they roared down the street in the direction they had come after leaving the dance. Fleetingly, Sally thought of reining in, letting him ride out of this alone. The vicious clatter of guns back there quickly banished the thought; you can't stop to explain to townsmen who think their bank has been robbed . . . . And there was something more, too. She threw a hasty sidelong glance at the tall, granite-jawed rider at her side. There was still that thread of trust, in spite of all this. She had to find out, to make sure.

Then they were flashing past the lane that led back to the meeting hall where the dance had been held. And two horsemen were just turning out of the lane into the street. Her breath caught in her throat. In the pale yellow moon-glow she recognized Jim's hardcase companion of the earlier evening—and her own father!

It didn't make sense. Something was wrong here, radically wrong. But there was no time to find out what. There was no time for thought. All she knew, in that chaotic instant, was that the man with her father yelled, "The Gila Kid!" and that there was the glitter of gun-steel in Jim Stanton's hand.

Sally made a grab for his arm. This mustn't be! He must not shoot her father! Her fingers closed on the cloth of his sleeve and she jerked back with all her might. It wasn't much, against his spring-steel muscles, but it was enough. The bullet flew wild.

Then they were past, drumming by the last scattered adobe buildings of the Cross River settlement. The night opened vast and ominous ahead. Soon, Sally guessed, Jim Stanton would swing off this northbound trail, to circle back toward the Border. And she would have to go with him, if he wanted her. She had been seen with him back there. If he really had robbed the bank, she was in it as deep as Jim. She had helped raid a bank. The thought of what this would mean to her father gave her a sharp, panicky pang of dread. But it was too late to change that now. Turning back would only make it harder for him.

There was no choice. If Jim would have her, she must go with him . . . .

THEY had been riding in silence. Once, at the crest of a hillock in the rolling terrain, Jim reined down and looked back. Far behind, they could hear the beat of racing hoofs. He made no comment as they broke into a long mile-eating lope again.

"Jim, I must know," she said at last. "Are you the Gila Kid?"

The way he looked at her made her wish she had not asked that. There was utter scorn in that look. Then he said, "Why did you grab my arm back there, and spoil my aim?"

"Oh, Jim!" she said. "My own father! How could I let you—"

"That hombre with Mike Walsh was your father? So that's the way they're workin' it! I might have known. It's a slick scheme, and they're pushin' it to showdown. Well, young lady, that settles one thing. You're goin' to ride home, by back trails, as fast as you can make it."

"Jim, you didn't answer me. Are you the Gila Kid?"

"Before this night is over, if they have their way, I reckon I will be the Gila Kid—and dead. Now you're goin' to head back to the Bent Arrow. If you don't know the back trails, pull off to the side and wait in that clump of brush up ahead

until your Cross River posse gets by. And for gosh sake, quit smilin' that way. You may not know it, but this is damn serious business."

"You're not hitting for the Border? Where are you going then?" It didn't really make much difference. She was going with him, wherever he went. She knew that now. That note of concern in his voice just now had told her that. He could talk himself blue in the face, trying to get her to ride back out of danger, but she would not leave him. For she knew now that he cared.

"To the Gila Kid's hideout. Now you—"

It took all of five minutes to convince him she was not going to turn back. Shouting over the drumimng roll of their horses' hoofs, he argued, he cajoled, he threatened. It did no good. She could be stubborn, too.

By the time he at last seemed to realize that, they were nearing the edge of the rolling grazing plains. Ahead the broken, rugged outline of the malpai reared up against the night sky like the angry breast of a choppy, perilous sea. Jim picked his way, unquestioningly, across a field of stubby buffalo grass, toward the mouth of one of the thousands of interlacing canyons which penetrated that forbidding area. So the Gila Kid's hideout was in the malpai! And always the posses that had tried to track him down had headed south, toward the Border!

Oftener than before, he stopped to listen to the distance-muffled sounds of the pursuit. It was almost as though he was holding back purposely. Sally wondered what his reason could be, when it should be so easy to shake the posse, once they reached the shelter of the malpai's tangled maze. But she did not question him.

Once he reined in to scan the backtrail and listen, at the very edge of the badlands cliff-line, she thought she heard hoofbeats ahead as well as behind. An apprehensive chill ran through Sally's body as she watched Jim's face.

Must it always be like this—danger ahead, and danger behind! Even the light of the moon must spell danger when a girl rides the outlaw trail. Would there never again be time for romance, for gentle, tender words, lovers' words, when the moon was out?

THEY rode on, carefully now, more slowly. The moon-glow faded as the great sandstone walls overhead pinched in. Half a mile up the canyon, Jim selected one of the narrow washes that slanted out on either side like the endless legs of a centipede. He turned off to the right and Sally followed. Here again he stopped, attentive to the dim rumble of the pursuit. Ahead, the sound of hoofbeats had ceased.

"Jim, please!" begged Sally. "Can't we hurry? Can't we get out of this place—out of the county, out of the country even? Some place where there'll be no chance of dad ever meeting you?"

He smiled. "Soon now," he said, and they went on, climbing the rugged, steep incline with a great turmoil of laboring hoofs on loose, sliding rock.

Over the crest of the gullied cut, Sally caught her breath as the ground dropped off ahead and she looked down into the dark abyss of another canyon.

"This way," Jim called guardedly. "We're gettin' there."

Abruptly a voice cut in from a tumble of rocks behind him: "That's far enough. Up with 'em! We got you covered."

Sally jerked around. She knew that voice. It was Sheriff Bascom!

A leveled sixgun was in his hand. Crouched in the shelter of the rocks, only his head and blocky shoulders showed. Out of the corner of her eye, Sally could see Jim's hand moving toward his holster as he slowly turned in the saddle. Suddenly he vaulted from his horse, and the gun was out in his hand.

"Run, Sally!" he cried. "Back the way you came!"

The sheriff's gun roared, and Jim staggered back. He was wounded! From the black rock shadows at his side, another figure leaped. A raised club was in his hand. With sickening force, it smashed down on Jim's skull. A scream froze in Sally's throat as she saw him spasmodically clutching air, falling forward. Then he was down, a sodden heap, and the brute who had clubbed him bent over to pick up Jim's fallen sixgun.

As he straightened, Sally realized with a start that it was Whip Vinson. "You fool!" Vinson snapped at Sheriff Bascom. "That shot of yours will draw the posse up here."

The sheriff stepped down from the rocks, the .45 dangling from his hand.

"They're goin' by. They missed the turn-off," said Bascom, cocking an ear toward the cut that led up from the canyon. Then, turning back: "What are we goin' to do with the girl? How much do you reckon she knows?"

"What are we goin' to do with her! Don't make me laugh! She cooked her own goose when she got tied up with the Gila Kid, didn't she? An outlaw's girl! You don't think for a minute anybody'd listen to her, do you, after she helped the Gila Kid rob Cross River's bank? And it sorta leaves that righteous daddy of hers out on a limb, too, don't it? Maybe you never thought of that either. . . . All right, honey bunch, climb off that horse. We don't want you dustin' out on us. Oh, hell, Bascom, go pull her off."

Something about this whole encounter rang false. At the dance Vinson and Jim had behaved like intimate friends. How come Vinson had swung so sharply, and so suddenly, to the side of the law? And how come he had got here so opportunely, with the sheriff, ahead of them? It was all just a little too pat. It didn't jibe.

Vinson's next words brought her back with a rush to imminent reality. He was raging on like a man gone drunk with the intoxication of his own voice. "If you had to use a gun on this bank-robber, Bascom," he said, "at least you might have finished the job. He might turn around and bite you, if he lives. It could happen. And that wouldn't do. No, not at all. Here!" He thumbed back the hammer of the revolver he held in his hand.

SALLY flung into action like a cornered cougar. 'Outlaw's girl,' Vinson had called her. She'd prove she was equal to the name. Sheriff Bascom was just coming up past the head of her horse. As she yanked out her .32, she gave the left rein a jerk that brought Bluebell sharply around, against the sheriff. Out of the tail of her eye, she saw Bascom thrown backward, stunned; he fell against an ugly outcrop of rock and lay still. And her gun covered Vinson.

"I can't miss." She bit out the words so they sounded brave, but she felt far from brave inside. "Drop your gun, Vinson. I'll shoot to kill—if you force me to."

Vinson lowered his gun. There was a silky, nasty smile on his face as he stared at her. "It won't do you any good," he said.

"Drop the gun," she repeated. "Drop it right where you are and come out here in the open with your hands in the air."

With that crafty, supercilious sneer, he complied. And she breathed again. She tried to marshal her spinning thoughts. What could she do now?

A groan from Jim swung her eyes his way for an instant, then back to Vinson. Jim had moved. He had brought one hand up to his poor bleeding head. Maybe, if she could hold Vinson like this for a few minutes longer, Jim would be able to ride.

Suddenly movement at her left caught her keyed-up senses. She snapped a look at the sheriff, whom she had all but forgotten. He had come to one knee, and in

his hand was his sixgun, hammer back—leveled unwaveringly at Jim!

Without thought, Sally jerked her own gun around and fired. The deeper roar of Bascom's revolver sounded a fraction of a second later. His bullet chipped rock a few feet in front of him and whistled off into the night. The gun slipped from his fingers, and he clamped his left hand to his side.

She had shot a sheriff! There'd be no turning back now. She was as truly, as irrevocably, an outlaw as Jim himself. And she didn't care! She had saved Jim from that cowardly shot. Together they would ride, to whatever lay beyond.

"No, you don't!" came a voice—a husky, weakened voice that sent a glorious surge of relief swarming through her overkeyed nerves. And Jim was there, sitting up, pointing a .45 at Vinson. From Vinson's position, she guessed that he had been about to take advantage of her preoccupation with Bascom and overpower her from behind.

She swung down, grabbed up the sheriff's fallen weapon. "I—I'll tie them up, dear, if you can keep holding that gun for a minute. Then we can ride away from here, if—if you feel strong enough."

Her heart sank. The grinding sound of hoofs ascending the cut from the canyon came clearly to her ears.

Jim must have heard too. But what was he saying?

"I reckon I could ride to the end of the world with you now, honey—when you call me 'dear' so natural-like."

"But—the posse! They're coming. We have to hurry or—"

"I think we can talk them out of any foolish ideas they may have. Just wait till I show them the old reward notice I've got on this gent that calls himself Vinson. Maybe we can scare up one for friend Bascom, too. They were in on this Gila Kid business together."

"A damned stoolie!" snarled Vinson.

"Oh, Jim! Jim, you aren't the Gila Kid!" For some silly reason her voice was all choked up, and she thought she was going to cry—out of sheer, blessed happiness.

Jim shook his head. "I got Vinson's little hardcase, Mike Walsh, drunk enough to take me to the hideout," he said, watching Vinson. "I let on that I was a jailbird, an' when I met Vinson he said he might have some work for me. But they must have got suspicious of me. Tonight, at the dance, Vinson asked me to pick up a sack of supplies he'd left behind the hardware store, and take it out to the cabin. I should've known they were trying to frame me as the Gila Kid. But, before I could break the gang, I had to make sure Bascom was in on it, too. There were three of them—Vinson and Bascom and Walsh. Walsh or Vinson would stage the holdups, then Bascom saw to it that the posses never caught up with them. We'll nab Walsh when the posse shows up."

Sally was kneeling by his side. "You must think I'm an awful hussy, putting my arm around you like this," she whispered. "Tell me, Jim, if you aren't an outlaw, what are you?"

"I'm a mighty lucky man, for one thing, honey, to've had you with me tonight. For another, I'm a special agent workin' out of the governor's office. . . . But as for you bein' a hussy—"

The approaching horsemen were close now. Just a few seconds more and they would be here. Jim apparently thought it safe to take his gaze off Vinson. His eyes, his adorable laughing eyes, looked up.

"Well, you thought I was a desperate gunman. I reckon I can think you're a hussy if I want to—and still love you."

And his thrilling, heavenly lips found hers.

GAME LITTLE BANDIT-LOVER

Flora's quick ear caught the stir of horses and men, closing in on the corral.

CHAPTER ONE

First Love Is the Last

IVY LANE always knew when Pete Hanford passed the Bon Ton Ladies Specialty Shop. Her ear seemed to recognize the particular clump of his horse's hoofs in the dust of Main Street.

Every time Pete drew near, Ivy waited with heightened color and sparkling eyes, expecting his horse to stop before her door, expecting Pete to enter, with his never-to-be-forgotten smile welcoming the return of his childhood sweetheart.

But Pete Hanford never would stop.

The dress shop, like a lodestone, drew Pete to town from his lonely ranch. But the moment he was at the door, and only a few steps separated him from the girl he longed to see again, his young face grew hard with a mighty resolution. Shoulders braced and jaw set firm, he he spoke to his lagging horse and passed by quickly.

In town, a hurt and bewildered girl turned back to the routine dullness of drygoods. Across the rangeland, a galloping horse carried a bronzed, tow-haired young rancher home, to the spread

A thrilling romantic novelette of cow-country courage

By Jack Bechdolt

In the intoxicating warmth of an outlaw cowboy's lips, broken-hearted Ivy Lane prayed for strength. . . . For she must besmirch her dead father's honored name, and give her sweetheart to another girl—in order to save her bandit lover from a hangnoose payoff!

where he had no companionship save his own dark thoughts.

Folks who saw Ivy Lane, returning at night to the empty house where she lived alone, commented, "It was her father, Sheriff Tom Lane, brought the law to Tipton."

Those who saw Pete, riding his solitary trail, said, "There goes Wild Bill Hanford's boy. Wild Bill was the worst this county ever saw. They say the boy's turning out lawless like his father."

Then, one day, Pete Hanford's horse stood ground-hitched before the Bon Ton Ladies Specialty Shop, and Pete Hanford's high heeled boots rapped out a hesitating approach, through the shop door.

Ivy had been busy in the little stock and fitting room at the rear; but she knew who it was without having to peer through the glass window of the door.

There was a moment when she didn't breathe at all. Then the blood went singing through her slim body. Her startled hands flew to the shining strands of onyx-black hair; anxious dark eyes scanned critically the mirror's report on a heart-shaped little face.

A moment later Pete was staring at

her. His lips opened to say something, but the words failed him. He just stared, and Ivy found herself equally wordless, now that this meeting so eagerly awaited, was reality.

SIMULTANEOUSLY, they took a step closer. Then another. Pete's hand went out. He touched her hair, her cheek, as if to reassure himself that she was real. Ivy trembled at his touch, exquisitely aware of his nearness.

"You're lovelier than I remember," Pete said softly, "a lot lovelier; and I've been dreaming about you for four years!"

Hungry blue eyes devoured her flushed face and soft, smiling red lips, her woman's figure, still lithe and quick with a girl's grace.

"You've grown into a woman, Ivy!"

"You've grown a lot, too, Pete!" Shy eyes lifted to his blue gaze, noting the lean, muscled body that he carried with such an air, the dark face with its gravity, unusual in one of his years. Yes, Pete had grown into a man. She sensed power in him, strength of body and strength of character—and, already, some dark shadow she could not define.

The secret brooding in his eyes lifted. Pete's slow, wide smile beguiled her as it always had. He chuckled, "Remember our first meeting? It was my eleventh birthday and you rode out to our ranch with your pap. My old man had promised me a bang-up dinner and a real birthday cake. But your pap took him to jail, instead."

"Yes, but you got the cake!"

"Do you think I'll ever forget it? The way you and your pap took me to your house and we had the party, and your father gave me that rifle—the first gun I ever owned. I'll always remember the times we had together, Ivy, in those years we were kids."

Pete's voice softened. "Remember our last goodby?"

She looked away from him, sweetly confused. Her voice was only half audible as she said, "I haven't forgotten."

In memory she saw a moonlight night, a boy of fifteen and a girl, two years his junior, who still wore her hair in a braided rope that dangled over her shoulder. Returning from a school party they had lingered outside Sheriff Tom Lane's door. The boy, awkward, but suddenly tender, had kissed her.

She had clung to Pete, returning his kiss with an impulse she did not understand. That was how her father found them. Tom Lane neither censured nor commented. But a few days later his motherless daughter was dispatched to a select girl's boarding school in Denver. Her father, who thought of her as still a child, saw that they did not meet again.

Ivy changed the subject hurriedly. "Pete Hanford," she chided, "are you aware I've been back in Tipton for six whole months and you haven't come near me? If you haven't forgotten all the good times we had as kids, why did you wait so long?"

It was Pete's turn to be confused. She saw the blue eyes clouded again by that dark secret. The graven little brackets about his lips tightened with the restless movement of his head.

"Maybe it's different now, Ivy. We're not kids, we're grown folks. And there was a reason—" He met her questioning look resolutely. "Wild Bill Hanford was my father—and I'm proud of him. But he was an outlaw, don't forget that. Remember, I told you once how my mother died?"

Ivy's face saddened. She longed to comfort Pete as she would comfort a hurt, bewildered small boy. Pete's mother had died of a broken heart the first time Wild Bill Hanford got into trouble with the law. At least, so the story ran and so Pete believed.

"I'd rather be dead myself than see any woman I love die for that reason," Pete muttered now. "And Ivy, Sheriff Tom

Lane didn't figure that I was exactly the sort to be kissing his daughter. I guess everybody in Tipton would agree with him."

She gave a shocked denial that he put aside with curt, bitter words.

"After that night, Ivy—after your father packed you off to boarding school—I took it pretty hard. Pride, I guess. I made up my mind I was going to be a big man and show the world. A man you'd be proud to know when you came back from Denver. And I worked hard, trying to make myself great.

"But somehow I never quite pulled it off. Maybe I'm not as smart as some. Anyway, our ranch never quite cleared expenses after my father died. It's in hock to the bank right now and I expect they'll take it away from me. So maybe I was—well, a little ashamed to tell you. This town figures that Wild Bill Hanford's boy won't come to any good end."

"PETE HANFORD, you—you drivelling idiot!" The girl, shy and trembling a moment before, flared with impatience. "You stayed away because you thought I'd be ashamed of you! Why—why that's insulting me!"

Pete's shocked protest was lost in her whirlwind of words.

"My own father used to say your father—for all he was an outlaw once—was one of the finest men he ever knew! Why, half the trouble he got into was because he never went back on an old friend."

"Your dad was right," Pete boomed. "I guess sticking to old friends isn't so wrong."

"Then you stick to this old friend, Pete Hanford. How about it?"

"This about it," Pete laughed. He caught her in his arms and swept her off her feet. He kissed her. Ivy's laugh was triumphant. It was that kiss she had been waiting for, ever since she had been separated from Pete.

"God bless you, Ivy," Pete boomed. "I needed a good, swift kick and that gave me one. I'm going to show this town I can amount to something yet."

"You can begin showing them right now!"

Ivy's eyes sparkled with sudden inspiration. A glance at an advertisement, tacked to the shop wall amid all the litter of women's dresses, silk stockings, hats, shoes and folderols, gave her the idea. "Pete, will you do something for me?"

"Why, sure—of course—"

"They're holding the annual chicken dinner for the church tonight. I want to go to it. And I want you to be my partner. Will you?"

Into the lean, brown face came a startled look. Pete's eyes glowed. Then the glow faded. His hesitation was painful.

"Of course, if you don't want to take me—" Ivy began.

"But I am taking you," he cried. "We'll show this town we don't care how much they gossip about any of us!"

* * *

It was midnight when the orchestra at the grange hall played Home Sweet Home.

The evening had been a great success. If the more conservative and righteous of Tipton had lifted eyebrows at the spectacle of Sheriff Tom Lane's daughter partnered by Wild Bill Hanford's unpromising son, at least honest critics had to admit they were the handsomest couple present. At the long tables where the church supper was eaten, Pete's modest good humor, his amusing remarks and anecdotes, had been widely repeated.

Ivy had been besieged by would-be dancing partners, but she had been happiest beside Pete, and envied by every other girl. And because she chose to show the world that she was Pete's staunch friend and admirer, she had won him at least tolerance and politeness from his worst critics.

Pete turned her out of the press of de-

parting merrymakers. They walked down a street that soon became open prairie, and stopped under some cottonwoods, beside a wide brown river. The moon was high and it gilded a path that led from their feet toward a mysterious, glamourous unknown shore.

"Ivy!" Pete's voice was at its deepest, sure sign that he was profoundly moved. "Ivy, I've got a lot to thank you for. You did something for me; made me face the folks in this town. I needed that and it's done me good!"

She was too moved by his understanding and gratitude to do more than cling to his hand, her smile wavering faintly in the moonlight.

"You're a wonderful girl," Pete went on softly. "I always thought you were the prettiest girl I knew. Now I know that you're the kindest and the smartest. Yes, and you've got the most courage. It took real backbone to do what you did for me tonight."

The moon glinted on his blue eyes, staring hungrily down at her from a dark face. She saw the nervous deepening of those character lines about his mouth. She caught the emotional wave that swept him and was stirred—dangerously stirred.

"And that's not all I want to say to you, either," Pete began. "In fact, I guess I always wanted to say it to you, ever since we were kids in school together. I—"

His fingers tightened about her hand. She was affected by the swift rhythm of his pulses. A hunger that was almost pain made her whisper when he paused, "I guess you can say anything you want to me, Pete."

She looked up at him, and Pete met her glance. His head bent and their lips met. Ivy swayed toward that kiss and his arms tightened around her. That kiss was fire, liquid fire that ran through her eager young body. It was music and laughter and—she knew it now—love!

It was Pete who ended their moment of silent ecstasy. His arms released her. He stepped back and she saw the moonlight on a face that was twitching with dark emotion. He looked shocked, almost frightened. Speaking suddenly, his voice was rasping in its effort to be casual. "I guess that's enough of that kind of fooling. That moonlight must have gone to my head."

She moved toward him uncertainly. What was it? What had changed him suddenly? That kiss of his meant just one thing to her—a declaration of his love. Now he acted like a man who wanted her to know it meant nothing, nothing except a moment's idle gallantry.

Her face began to flame. If Pete didn't want to kiss her—if he wasn't moved as she had been—she would not beg for his kisses, ever.

Pete began to talk rapidly, his voice and manner very brisk. "Ivy, I mighty near forgot what I came to see you about, today. It was a matter of business. I came to ask you a kind of a favor and, if you don't feel like doing it for me, I wish you'd promise you won't ever mention I asked for it?"

Ivy's laugh covered an overwhelming confusion and hurt. "You sound mighty mysterious, Mr. Pete Hanford! What in the world is this favor?"

"Promise not to tell a soul?"

She nodded, curious and startled by his earnestness.

"I had to come to your shop today because you're the only person I'd trust to sell me a thing like that and not talk about it afterwards. I want to buy an outfit of woman's clothes, Ivy. Dress, stockings, everything complete."

CHAPTER TWO

Moonlight Brings Heartbreak

OUT of a stunned silence Ivy gasped, "Say that again!" It was preposterous. Of all the requests Pete might make, this was the most incomprehensible. When

he repeated it, it still seemed fantastic. Then came a swift, chilling thought that she put into words. "Pete, what woman?"

Pete sounded impatient, almost angry. "You don't know her. She's my cousin. She's at my ranch now. I want something kind of special and pretty for her. Something suitable for her to get married in."

"Married? You mean—she's marrying you?"

"I didn't say so, did I?" Pete's voice was shocked. "It isn't anything I want to talk about, even to you," he went on. "Nobody knows she's at my ranch. And I don't want 'em to know."

Ivy's air castles tumbled about her head. She had loved Pete Hanford with the simple faith of girlhood. She thought he had returned to her because of the old love between them. How she had gloried in her brief possession of him, showing him off before all Tipton as her choice of a man! So sure; so idiotically happy—and such a fool! Just a pathetic, egotistical, misguided little fool. Pete had really come to town to buy a trousseau for the cousin he meant to marry.

Ivy laughed because her pride forebade her weeping. It sounded like tinkling, brittle glass, false as the glamour of the moonlight.

"Well, of all things! Of course I'll sell you a dress and all the fixings for your bride. Why in goodness' name didn't you tell me the glad news hours ago?"

"I forgot." The face she laughed up into was shadowed, but she felt it was not a happy one. "I was so damned glad to see you after all these years that I clean forgot Flora. Could—could I buy that outfit tonight, Ivy? I had kind of promised I'd bring it to her when I came back from town."

* * *

A woman's dress of pink, sprigged with delicate rosebuds, silk stockings and underthings, pretty slippers and a hat—a trousseau for a bride! Together in the little Bon Ton Ladies Specialty Shop, at one o'clock in the morning, Ivy and Pete picked them out together. She, Ivy Lane, choosing the pretties for a woman who would marry the man she loved!

The shop curtains were drawn close, the lamp carefully shielded. Pete had asked it.

"Ivy, you know how this town talks about me. I'm damned if I'll have 'em clacking about Flora, too! We've got to keep it secret!"

Even in the confusion of that surprising and frightful hour she wondered at his reason. But he had asked it. Let it go! Give him anything he asked for and get away from him. Get away to decent privacy where she could laugh—or cry—or perhaps do both, at Ivy Lane who had made a prize fool of herself!

THE purchases were made and wrapped up. Pete counted out the money. They opened the door a crack and made sure nobody was about, to see them slipping out.

Pete's hand covered Ivy's as it held the door knob. They stood in the dark. The lamp was out now. She could not pull the door while he held it.

"Ivy, I can't begin to tell you how I feel about all this. Your being so kind to me tonight. And—and the kick I got out of seeing you again after all this time. I never forgot. I never forgot one day or hour of those old times. You were the best partner a boy ever had and—and I want you to know I have always loved you—"

She felt his stirring. She felt his head bending close, his lips seeking hers. She struck at that nearing face, slapped it sharply.

"Don't you dare, Pete Hanford!" The words followed raggedly. "You save your kisses for the girl you're going to marry." And then she won back her self control. Her voice was natural and matter of fact.

"Excuse me, Pete, but I've had a long, hard day. I guess I'm just a little bit tired. The best of luck to you. And give my love to the bride. I hope to meet her some day."

That was how she left him, with a smile and a brisk nod. She had but a little way to walk to her home and she would not let him accompany her.

"Hurry home," she chided. "Hurry home—to Flora!"

There! That was ended. At last she was free to go home and cry her fool eyes out.

THE Bon Ton Ladies Specialty Shop was open for business the next day, and the next and the next. Outwardly, Ivy Lane was her lively composed self and twice as busy as usual. Busy, because only in hard work could she forget the shock and humiliation of her discovery about Pete. Her love for him ran deeper than she had realized. All during her years away from him she had lived on the hope of finding him again, unchanged, her childhood sweetheart.

There were more visitors to the shop than customary. Every gossip in town felt she must say something to the girl about her escort to the church supper. She parried their questions and insinuations. "Of course I'm fond of him," she laughed. "We've been friends since childhood. And my father always predicted that Pete would be one of the most useful citizens around here. Wild Bill may have been lawless, but he was a leader of men!"

If only she could forget Pete. If she could just get away from the sound of his name. He loved another girl. She had to adjust her life to that.

With a sigh of thankfulness she locked the shop door, three evenings after that meeting. Dusk was falling. Down along the little street she heard a popping of shots and distant shouting. She went home without giving it any attention. Pistol shots were not uncommon in a town where range riders came to trade pay checks for a hilarious holiday.

She was tidying the kitchen, after her lonely supper, when the knock came at her door. The visitor was Lou Edwards, sheriff of Yucca County. Outside, half a dozen mounted men were waiting.

"I've got a question to ask that's in your line, Miss Ivy," the sheriff began. "This was tore off a woman's dress that came from your shop, wasn't it?"

Edwards handed her a torn scrap of pink print cloth sprigged with rosebuds.

Staring at it, Ivy began to tremble. "Something has happened to Pete Hanford," she whispered.

She had seen Pete ride away with that dress. Now this torn, muddy scrap! Her imagination pictured an accident on the trail; Pete hurt, perhaps killed.

Immediately she wished she had cut out her tongue before it had betrayed her.

"Pete Hanford! I might have known it!" The sheriff's eyes blazed. "So you sold that dress to Wild Bill's boy!"

"I did not! I said nothing of the sort, Mr. Edwards—"

Edwards' smile was pitying. "Too late, my dear. I understand your sticking up for Pete. You and him are old friends. But the fat's in the fire now. The man I've got to find is Pete, and I guess I'd better be riding fast—"

"Tell me what's happened?" Ivy's voice was sharp with fright. "What has Pete got to do with this?" Her fingers clutched his arm. Her eyes were smudges of terror against a white, horrified face.

The sheriff's voice was regretful, but officially sharp. "Ivy, the Tipton bank was stuck up tonight. The cashier was shot. He may die. And the man who did the job had disguised himself as a woman—in this dress. When he ran out the back door to reach his horse he caught his clothes on a splinter and left this sample behind him. Pete Hanford is broke and

desperate for money. Now you tell me he bought this woman's dress. Fit those facts together and you get a pretty clear idea who the sheriff of this county ought to be looking for."

CHAPTER THREE

No Greater Sacrifice

THE door closed after the sheriff. In the yard the horses stirred and riders moved off. The rumble of hooves died away. The silence startled Ivy from horrified immobility. The lawmen were riding after Pete! She had betrayed him!

Facts fitted together now, making a damning indictment. Pete's bitterness over failures; his savage declaration that he would triumph over Tipton; his secrecy about the dress.

Perhaps his story of Flora was a lie! Even in the tumult of racing thoughts she caught at this ray of hope. But if it was a lie, the truth was worse. Pete had done a desperate, foolish thing. He was in trouble and she had to help him.

Ivy's horse was in the barn. She flung a saddle on it in breathless haste. Edwards and his men would take the new county road. She might count on that. But there was a short cut, the original trail she and Pete had traveled so often. And the horse knew that trail well.

* * *

Pete's modest house was a serene, black blot in the vast darkness. No shadows of men or horses were in the yard, no sounds except the sleepy croaking of a bullfrog in the creek and the sigh of the breeze in the cottonwoods.

The kitchen window showed a light. Ivy peeped in before she knocked. Pete was lounging at the table from which supper dishes had not yet been removed. The lamplight fell on his dark face. He looked wretched. While she watched he started at some fancied sound and she saw his hand move toward his holstered gun.

The blue eyes were wide with amazement when he saw who knocked at his door. "Ivy! I was thinking about you; wishing you were here to talk to and figuring maybe I'd never get that chance again."

He would have taken her hand, but she snatched it back, speaking abruptly: "You've got to get out of here, Pete. The sheriff's coming. The sheriff and a posse!"

Pete's breath whistled. His head came up, like a startled horse. His hard fists clenched. "You're sure of that, Ivy?"

"I raced them from town. I'm just ahead of them. Edwards knows, Pete! He found a piece of the dress caught in the back door of the bank. And like a fool I was tricked into recognizing it before I knew about the hold up and the cashier being shot. I did the only thing I could to up make for it!"

"Whatever you did was right and kind and generous, because you never went back on a pal in your life!" For a moment his arm was about her shoulder. Even in that moment the reassurance was sweet. "Now tell me all you know and make it quick, Ivy."

She told him.

While she gasped the story, the door of an inner room opened to admit another woman. Ivy did not see her until her cry interrupted them. "So that's what happened! Pete, don't you understand—"

Pete whirled toward her, his face furious. "Flora, shut up." Ivy saw him take her by the arm. He spoke to her in words Ivy couldn't hear.

So this was Flora!

She was beautiful. Not dark with a delicate white skin, like Ivy, but brown haired and blooming. Yes, she was lovely, Ivy admitted with an aching heart. She saw Flora looking up at Pete like a dutiful child and heard her low promise: "I'll do exactly as you say, Pete dear." And Pete's commending pat on the shoulder as she obeyed him.

PETE turned back to Ivy. He seemed to have grown in height and in years. His face was hard.

"You agree with the sheriff, I suppose? You think I stuck up the Tipton bank and killed that fellow?"

Startled by the harshness in his words, Ivy gasped the simple truth: "I never stopped to think anything about it. I just came out here—to warn you!"

Now it was Pete who was startled. His lean face softened. "You never even thought about it! You just came because I was in trouble! Ivy, I—" He checked himself. Suddenly he was bitter again. "All right, I did stick up the bank! Why not? It's what you'd expect of Wild Bill's son, isn't it? It all fits together. I was dead broke, and sore at life. I was trying to make a stake for—for Flora—and me. Now I'm going to prove that it's so by getting out of this country one jump ahead of the law. Flora, come on!"

Ivy ran beside them to the corral. She helped round up two horses; she helped them saddle.

Pete caught her arm. "You've got to go home. You can't be mixed up in this. Get started, Ivy—"

"I'm not getting started yet." She faced him defiantly. "You've got your hands full, you and Flora. If there's trouble with the sheriff a third gun may help. I brought one along."

"No," Pete began furiously. Then he choked. His hands caught her shoulders as he peered down at her. His voice thrilled her as it had that night beside the river. "You darling! But you can't do it, Ivy. I won't allow—"

Flora's quick ear caught the stir of horses and men, closing in on the corral. "Pete!" she screamed, and her horse leaped forward. Pete lifted Ivy to her mount and swung himself to his saddle. "Keep with us till we get clear," he panted, as their horses scampered after Flora.

There were startled shouts from the dark. Commands to halt, half lost in the mad rush of night wind, rain past Ivy's ears. Then a ragged fire of rifles and six-guns tore the night.

Her horse ran without guidance, racing in the wake of the other two. In the dark Pete was near. She heard him shout encouragement, but lost the words. And behind, through the shadows, rode a sheriff's posse. For once, one of the honest Lanes was riding on the wrong side of the law.

The firing stopped. The lawmen had no targets until the three fugitives topped a rise. Pete saw the danger. "Keep your heads down. And hurry!"

They thundered over the rise, three black figures silhouetted against a sky full of starshine. Ivy heard guns popping. They seemed ridiculously far off—and futile. But the lead whistled close.

She pitched abruptly to the left. She felt no pain, only a strange numbness—a vast, engulfing sense of surprise, of unreality. She had been hit!

"All right, Ivy?"

Pete was looking back anxiously. Ivy gritted her teeth. They insisted on chattering. "All right," she made herself call back.

At least, she thought, it wasn't much of a hit. It seemed to be her shoulder, her right arm wouldn't behave. She managed to feel with her left hand and touched blood that welled through the sleeve of her dress.

The feel of blood turned her giddy. She reeled, almost lost her stirrup. She was frightened, too, scared, as she had not been since she was a very little girl afraid of the dark. The dark—that was it! Darkness that rushed over all the earth, swooping down upon a frightened child.

"No time for that," she muttered through clenched teeth. "A lot of use I'd be to him if I caved in now. I've got to stick it out!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Dan Cupid Pays the Piper

THE wound was beginning to pain. Fitful flashes of agony burned her right side. The horses were going at a walk. Pete had turned into the hills. That slow pace saved her from falling.

Finally, she blundered into Pete and Flora. They had checked the horses outside a little line camp, a dark, silent cabin built of slabs. Pete's voice came to her.

"This is where you turn back, Ivy. We'll rest a quarter hour, then shove on."

They were dismounting. She must get down. If she sat her horse all alone in the dark they'd suspect something wrong—they would discover she was hurt.

She stumbled into the crude room, where Pete had kindled a quick fire in an airtight stove.

"You heard me about going home, Ivy? No more of your pigheadedness."

"Yes, Pete." She was clinging to the frame of the door. Just a few more minutes to endure and it would be all right. Pete and Flora would be riding again—riding off to safety—and love!

"You've been wonderful, Ivy! Sticking by me like this. I'm so proud of you—so— Oh hell, I can't say it right, but I'll never forget you!"

Sudden concern showed in his blue eyes. She looked like a white ghost, standing there. "Why, you poor young one, you're all beat out! Here, sit down."

"Please go!"

Surely that hoarse voice was not her own! There was agony in it. "Please go—now. You and Flora. Flora," she extended both hands toward the staring woman, "I guess we both love Pete a lot, you and I?" The words were scarcely more than a wistful sigh. "You'll marry him—make him happy—and—and—"

"Look out!" Pete roared. His arms caught the limp young body that pitched forward. The blackness had taken her.

There was a bunk in the corner. Pete laid her there, and Flora sent him for water. When he came back with it she held the lantern high, and pointed. Across Ivy's white young shoulder and bosom, trailed a steady red flow from the gunshot wound.

For half an hour Pete bathed, probed and made temporary bandages to stop the bleeding. Flora, holding the light, was awestruck at the concentrated fury of his work.

She touched his arm at last, her voice impatient. "Pete, that posse's likely to find our trail any minute."

"The posse!" Pete straightened his shoulders. "I clean forgot them!"

He strode to the door of the shack and began to pepper the night sky with pistol shots. Flora, clutching his arm, panted, "Have you gone crazy?"

"I want that posse," Pete raged. "If they're not deaf or dead they ought to hear that racket."

"Pete, don't you understand? They'll take you to jail! They'll hang you for that stickup if the cashier dies—"

He turned on her savagely. "I'm not leaving Ivy here, alone. I'm staying. The sheriff can fetch a doctor out from town." The distress in Flora's face caught his eye. "You get out of here, Flora. You know where to go, what to do. I'm not going to be any help to you from now on. Get going while you have the chance."

She looked undecided. Then she put her hand on his arm and said in a low voice, "I'll stick, too, Pete. Maybe I can be of use to her. You're a stubborn, hot headed fool, Pete Hanford! You're running your neck into a hangnoose. But I guess I know how you feel about it."

THE black waves that had engulfed her rushed Ivy on a hurrying tide.

When her eyes opened it was Pete's face she saw bending over her. He loomed

(Continued on page 108)

TRAILSIDE COOKBOOK

AS A RULE Western camp cooks do not go in for cake baking, but Lengthy could, on occasion, turn out a tasty loaf. I have his recipe, which a visitor once wrote out for him on the inside of his cupboard door.

With one cup of brown sugar, mix one teaspoonful of cinnamon, half a teaspoon, each, of cloves and nutmeg and half a teaspoon of salt. To this, add one cup of water, a third of a cup of lard and two cups of raisins. Put the mixture on the stove and boil for three minutes, stirring to prevent scorching. Then set it aside and, when cool, add two cups of flour which has been mixed with a flat teaspoon of baking powder, and one teaspoon of baking soda that has been dissolved in a small quantity of water. Pour this into a greased loaf tin and bake in a moderate oven from a half to three-quarters of an hour. If a broom splint thrust into the cake has no particles of raw dough clinging to it, the cake is done.

"If I don't have all them spices," Lengthy remarked, "I just leave 'em out. And some times I throw in a handful of nut meats."

In a camp where eggs are obtainable, the following two recipes are useful. But don't be tempted to make this Devil's Food loaf unless you want to be teased for a "repeat."

Stir a half cup of cocoa into a half cup of water. Add two level teaspoons of soda and set aside until the remainder is mixed. Mix one and three-quarters cups of sugar with three-quarters of a cup of butter or lard. Beat two eggs. Add to them three-quarters of a cup of sour milk. Stir this into the sugar and shortening mixture, then add two and one-half cups of white flour, stirring in the cocoa mixture last. Pour this into a greased loaf tin and bake slowly.

This one egg cake is mighty good spread with jelly. Mix one-quarter of a cup of butter or lard with a cup of sugar. Into this mixture stir one cup of milk, (evaporated milk will do) and one and three-quarters cups of flour which has been mixed with two teaspoons of baking powder. If you have any flavoring extract, a teaspoonful of that should be added. Bake in a greased loaf tin.

THE Ranger supplied me with two tasty recipes that may be made up in camp and packed on trips. The first he called a "New England Sandwich."

For this, you mix with two cups of chopped canned corn beef, a half cup of chopped sour or sweet pickles, one teaspoonful of finely chopped onion and a

third of a cup of salad dressing. Spread the mixture on buttered bread slices. Any prepared mayonnaise will do.

His own recipe is worth trying.

Mix one flat teaspoonful of dry mustard with half a teaspoon of salt and two flat tablespoons of sugar. Add one tablespoonful of butter and one egg. Then stir in half a cup of mixed vinegar and water—depending on how acid the vinegar is—and heat to the boiling point, stirring to keep from burning.

He also made a salad that he packed in a glass jar, or covered enamel container, for carrying purposes, and which never failed to make a hit.

To two cups of chopped corn beef, cold roast beef or canned tongue, add twice the amount of cold potatoes, cut not too finely, two tablespoonsful of chopped onion, four hard-boiled eggs cut fairly small and two tablespoonsful of sweet or sour pickles. Mix until moist with the above dressing.

Molly Dee made delicious dried beef sandwiches which were popular on hiking and horseback trips—and easy to make. To make one dozen of them, soak half a pound of dried beef in water for a half or three-quarters of an hour. Remove and press out all the liquid from the meat. Dip in flour and fry quickly and lightly in butter. Place the results between thin slices of buttered bread.

Molly makes another sandwich filling which she declares she always uses when she "wishes to put men in good humor." It is slightly more elaborate, yet not at all difficult to prepare.

To one half pound of finely cut ham add three chopped hard-boiled eggs, a quarter of a pound of cheese, cut into small bits and one large sour pickle, chopped fine. Moisten this with salad dressing or mayonnaise, to which has been added a small amount of mixed, or dry mustard—according to your taste. This is a good filler for any kind of bread.

I found that recipe quite useful at a camp where all hands returned at noon for a quick lunch, only to hasten off again for the afternoon. A dish of that hearty sandwich spread could wait in a cool spot, ready to create an appetizing meal in record time, needing only some hot coffee to serve with it. But it is well to remember, if you leave your camp unguarded, all foods must be carefully protected from marauding animals or insect pests.

ONE last recipe, which is tempting to outdoor appetites. Lengthy calls it "Pineapple Trick"; why, I haven't been able to discover. And here it is, in his own words:

"Soak a pound of dried apricots over night, then chop 'em up fine and mix 'em with a number two can of grated pineapple. Throw in two cups of sugar—more if you've got a awful sweet tooth—and cook the whole thing kinda slow, maybe an hour, till the apricot is nice and tender and the jam tastes yum-yum good."

I asked him if he could not be more accurate regarding the time, and he replied, "Well, ma'am, if you're any kind of a cook, you can tell when it's done by stirrin' and tastin' it."

In the next issue, I am going to tell you about Chuck Wagon Charley's bacon muffins, and a dish that is very popular in Wyoming, called by the camp cook who first made it for me, "Slum Royal." It is guaranteed to please the most hearty masculine appetite, as well as the most delicate taste of a lady. In fact, a mouthful of it will usually develop a hearty appetite, even in the most unenthusiastic of eaters."

—Myrtle Juliette Corey.

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THE PONY EXPRESS

THE sun is warm and the smell of sage is in the air. The Pony Express rider has galloped into camp again with a deep suntan and a pouch filled with letters. Step up, saddlemates, and get your mail. There's romance waiting and new friends to be made.

This Ranny Wants An Eastern Girl!

Gentlemen:

I have been a regular reader for some time and I wonder if I could use your *Pony Express* to get me some new friends in the north and east to write to. Or in a foreign country, if they speak English.

I am 20, live on a ranch, punch cows all day. Have finished high school, took a business course, but did not like it. Me for the great out doors. I will send a horn from our Brahma bulls, that we dehorned, to the writers of the first fifteen letters I get. These horns make good trumpets to blow, and are pretty when polished. I will send them rough, just as they come from the bull. But I will tell my friends how to polish them.

I am interested in writing to both boys and girls, but what I would really like to find is a pretty eastern girl, a blonde, that wants a cowboy friend.

Can you find me some pen pals like that?

Willis Reed.
786 Fannin St.,
Beaumont, Texas

Enjoys Life Immensely

Dear Editor:

I sure found a "gold mine" when I discovered your swell magazine, and I have staked my claim on it; in fact I couldn't get along without it.

I wonder if the *Pony Express* messenger could bring a seventeen year old blonde lots of pen pals. Age doesn't matter. I promise to sling a letter back at everyone who sends one in my direction.

I enjoy life immensely but you'll have to write if you want to find out what my hobbies are. Come on; pardners, you're all welcome; and I'm true blue.

Caroline Miller,
Waunakee, Wis.

WALTER BURKE is a lonely telegraph boy living in a small fishing village. He says that he is tall, gangling and not an Adonis; in fact, about the homeliest lad in the world. Believe this if you will. He is 6 ft. 1, 160 lbs., and has brown hair. He would like to hear from girls near his age, 16.—Lockport, N. S., Canada.

BARBARA EGGMAN loves to play the piano, knit and do fancy work. Hiking and singing are two more of her many hobbies. Babs is 18 years old, 5 ft. 5 and weighs 120 lbs. She has dark brown eyes and hair. Young men between 18 and 25 hold her particular interest.—Box 245, Norwich, Ont., Canada.

ANNA WAINES is a young widow of 24. She works on a farm and is very lonely. Anna is a tiny little thing, only 5 ft. 1½ in. tall, and weighing but 106 lbs. Men and women from all parts of the world are welcome at Anna's corral.—R. R. I., Ridgeway, Ont., Canada.

KAY LANETI likes odd and interesting friendships, particularly big he-men from the great outdoors. Kay is 25, has auburn hair and brown eyes. She finds the big city very lonely at times, and this causes her to pursue with fervor her quest for the unusual.—4142 Kenmore Ave., Chicago, Ill.

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THE PONY EXPRESS

RALPH KILGOURSE is partly paralyzed in his right arm and leg. This has prevented him from getting a job or going out with other boys and girls. He is saving his money so he can go out West and there, not have to see too many people. He wants to hear from Westerners about their part of the country. 92 Eastern Ave., Springfield, Mass.

SAM LINDSAY is a hockey, baseball and swimming fan. He likes all other sports too. Sam is a dark-haired chap, 5 ft. 11 in. tall and weighing 140 lbs. He is 17 years old. You can't write too many letters for this lad to answer. Try it and see.—Post Office Building, Owen Sound, Ont., Canada.

MARIE ALUISE is praying to hear from cowboys from southwest Texas to Canada. She is 19, has olive skin, big brown eyes and is a brunette. Everybody is welcome to write this good looking girl. Her mailbox is waiting to be filled to the brim.—R. F. D. 2, Union Ave., Newburgh, N. Y.

STAN OLENIK is crazy to hear from pen pals in foreign countries. Modestly, he describes himself as 21, 5 ft. 9 in. tall, with blue eyes and dirty blond hair. He is keeping his fingers crossed. Don't disappoint him.—5068 Caniff Ave., Detroit, Mich.

ANNA HAMILTON is a city girl who wants to be a cowgal. She loves to ride and is fond of all outdoor hobbies. Anna is 16 years old, tall and sorta slim. She is wasting away with impatience hoping to hear from that certain handsome puncher.—745 Park Ave., Columbus, Ind.

MELVIN NELSON is very good looking. He has traveled all over the U. S. and has had plenty of adventures. Why not write to this 24 year old wanderer and find out just what experiences he has been through. You'll find it interesting.—6602 S. Richmond St., Chicago, Ill.

LEO KILGARIFF wants to hear from girls in America, particularly cowgirls. He is 5 ft. 11, 165 lbs., has brown hair and gray eyes. His hobby is horses. Come on, girls, and write to this lonely Aussie.—70 Stanley St., Burnside, So. Australia.

LILLIAN KNOWLES ushers at amateur boxing shows and can tell you all about the manly art. She is 5 ft. 3, weighs 115 lbs., has light hair and blue eyes. Her favorite sports are fishing and riding. Music, books and stamp collecting are also among her hobbies.—1385 Seaview Ave., Victoria, B. C., Canada.

JOHN PARKER is a poet and has his name with several publishers. At the moment he is laid up with arthritis in the hospital. John is an ex-soldier, 5 ft. 10, and 160 lbs. He is 47.—I. S. H. Hospital, Marshalltown, Iowa.

ESTHER STRONG is a tall, slender miss of 19. She has reddish-brown hair and brown eyes. Esther will send you a photograph and let you judge her looks for yourself. She is married, but is getting a divorce.—Naples, Idaho.

ISADORE ROMMES wants to hear from girls having long hair (blonde or brunette), between the ages of 20 to 36. He is 28, 5 ft. 9, and 193 lbs. Isadore will send a souvenir to the first 25 who write and promises an interesting letter. He is single.—East Main St., Caledonia, Minn.

BILL CROMWELL likes to collect Indian relics and tramp through the hills. His sports are boating, riding and roller skating. He lives only an hour's drive from the California Fair. Bill is 23 and quite tall.—R. I. Box 215, Livingston, Cal.

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(Continued from page 103)

like a huge, protective shadow, a dim presence that was good to feel. She smiled faintly and tried to touch his cheek with a hand strangely helpless and heavy.

"Ivy! Ivy, you're all right. You're a lot better. Atta girl, Ivy, let's see that smile again." Pete's voice was shaken.

"You've been out for two days, honey," he went on. "The doctor from town's been looking after you and he says you're doing fine. You can thank Edwards for that. He got the doctor out. And he let me stay to help."

"Edwards! Then—Pete!" Her eyes turned about the cabin. At the door lounged a man with a rifle in his hand. She saw the nickel badge that glittered on his vest. There were other men and horses about a fire outside.

"They caught you!"

Forgetful of weakness and pain, she sat up in the bunk and clasped Pete in her fright. "They'll hang you!"

"Now you hush up," Pete soothed. "It's all right, honey."

His arms were a haven she had long been hungry for. She clung to him, finding new life and strength in his nearness and his tenderness. If only she might stay forever in Pete's arms!

But a woman was watching them from the shadows. She was smiling, yet her eyes were tragic. Ivy struggled free. "Don't you touch me," she panted. "You go back to Flora!"

She saw his face set again in that bitter, hard look. Pete turned away from her and went outside. The deputy sheriff with the rifle strolled after him.

Edwards came in to her bedside. The sheriff drew up a stool and sat down.

"Glad to see you better, Ivy. You sure made me trouble enough, but maybe if you hadn't been along I wouldn't have caught up with Pete so quick."

He shook his head at her reproachfully. "I never expected to find Honest Tom

Lane's girl on this side of the fence! You're headed for a lot of heartbreak if you've gone and lost your head over Pete. You knew he was going to marry her?" The sheriff jerked his head at Flora.

"Yes, I knew."

"They stick to that story, all right. Pete says he bought the dress for her wedding outfit, then lost it when he was riding home to the ranch. But any jury in this state would say Pete was a liar. He needed a stake and he had his eye on that bank; that's what a jury will say!"

Ivy straightened up, panting defiance. "Don't expect me to help convict him. I won't testify and you can't make me!"

The sheriff sighed. "Women sure do complicate my work! I should think you'd feel some shame, keeping on in love with a man that wants to marry another woman! And you the daughter of the best sheriff we ever had!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Love Mends Broken Hearts

IVY'S cheeks were hot. Edwards had called the turn. She loved Pete. It was something bigger than her pride or sense of duty. It was something she couldn't mend now. She would always love Pete!

He rose. "Your being sick delayed us two days out here. It wasn't safe to move you. But the doc says you're all right now. We're going back tonight."

He went outside. She heard his hearty voice giving orders to saddle and pack up.

Two men brought in a stretcher improvised from poles and a blanket. Pete stooped over her to lift her from her bed. As his arms closed about her, he whispered, "I want you to know I love you, Ivy. I never loved any other woman.

"And what about Flora!"

"I can't talk about that, honey. You've

(Continued on page 110)

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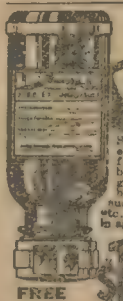

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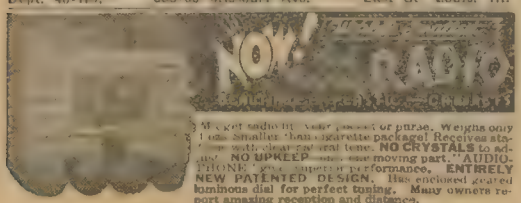

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(Continued from page 109)

just got to take my word for it. Look at me, Ivy! Look at me! You know I love you. You know I'm telling the truth!"

That was Pete talking—Pete Hanford whom she had known and trusted so many years. Ivy looked into his blue eyes, and the suspicion and doubt were gone.

"I love you, Pete," she whispered. "I'll trust you. No matter what happens, I'll wait—and trust you!"

Darkness had come outside. The fire burned low. In the cabin there were lanterns to give light, and the little group made a plain target for a man who lurked outside.

Ivy was first to see that shadow, a ragged, gaunt little figure, half crouching as he levelled two sixguns. Before she could speak, his command rang over them, "Reach, all of you! Get your hands up. Now back up to the wall. Back!"

Edwards, the two deputies and Pete obeyed almost as one.

Flora screamed, her face suddenly radiant, "Joe! Here I am, Joe. I prayed you'd get here—"

"Come over here, beside me," the ragged man panted.

"Joe!" Flora's voice had gone shrill. "Joe, behind you—"

Joe's gun belched flame as he spun around. At the same time another gun exploded. Joe dropped, clutching at his side in agony. Another of Edwards' deputies stepped out of the shadows.

"Got him, Sheriff!"

Edwards peered at Joe. "Seems to me I've your picture on a bill in my office. You're wanted for escaping from state's prison last month."

Joe's grimace was a bitter confession. "I'll talk," he muttered. "Why not? You're so smart you'd find out anyway. When I broke jail I headed for Pete Hanford's ranch. I knew he'd help me. And I sent for Flora to meet me there." Joe's

hand closed over the fingers of the woman who sobbed beside him. "Flora and I were planning to get married."

Pete nodded, answering the startled glance that Ivy gave him. Somehow ten years had slipped off Pete's young shoulders. The lines of his face had softened.

"Flora's folks saved my father from a law posse one time," Pete said to Ivy. "It was the kind of a favor the Hanfords don't forget."

IVY nodded. Radiance was flooding her heart. Pete loved Flora perhaps, but as a brother might love her.

"I wanted Flora and Joe to get clear of the law," Pete went on, in his simple, honest narrative. "I kept remembering how my own mother died of shame because she married an outlaw. I didn't want Flora to know agony like that."

"Joe promised he'd go straight if he could just have another chance." Pete glanced at the sheriff. "If he held up that bank and shot anybody, I don't know anything about it. All I know is that I bought Flora a wedding outfit."

"I understand. That was sweet of you," Ivy whispered, and Pete's big fingers tightened over hers.

"Next thing I knew, Ivy tells me the bank was held up," Pete went on. "All I could think about was Flora. If Joe was caught she'd have that lifetime disgrace to face. I did the only thing I could. I lit out and gave your boys somebody to chase."

"And that's the truth, every word of it," Joe's hoarse voice took up the story. "It was the wedding dress gave me the idea. We were broke. We had to have a stake. I dressed up in that dress and rode to Tipton. Pete and Flora didn't know anything about it."

At the end of that confession Sheriff Edwards swelled with justifiable pride.

"You boys wondered why I wasted time fooling around with a sick girl," he said

(Concluded on page 112)

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30x4.50-21	2.40	1.15
28x4.75-19	2.45	1.20
29x4.75-20	2.60	1.25
29x5.00-19	2.85	1.25
30x5-20	2.85	1.25
6.25-17	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
6.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.25-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.40
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.40
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.50
33x6.00-21	3.65	1.55
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.60
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Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3½	$2.35	$.90	30x4½	$3.45	$1.45
31x4	2.95	1.25	34x4½	3.45	1.45
32x4	2.95	1.25	33x5	3.65	1.65
33x4	2.95	1.25	34x5	3.75	1.75
34x4	3.25	1.35	35x5	3.95	1.75
32x4½	3.35	1.45			

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Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
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33x6	4.25	2.25	38x9	11.45	4.95
32x6	7.95	2.95	44x9	13.25	4.95
28x6	9.95	4.45			

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Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
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32x6-20	4.45	1.85	42x8-20	8.95	4.95
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(Concluded from page 111)

with a glance at Ivy. "This is why. I was baiting a trap for this man. I figured that Pete stuck up the bank—until I got here and found out that he'd given up his chance for freedom in order to help you. It was then somebody else held up the bank"

The sheriff's hand went out to Pete.

"Everybody makes mistakes once in a while," he grinned. "But I guess you and Ivy aren't making any, feeling about each other like you do."

"We are not," Pete agreed, his arms closing about her.

Ivy, held close to his breast, could have echoed that boast if she had had any breath left. But Pete's kisses were taking all the breath she could spare, and more.

THE END

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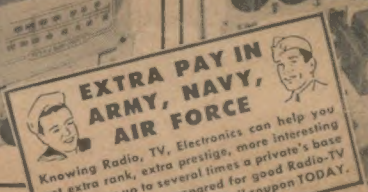

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